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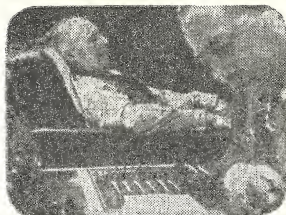
by ERIC FRANK RUSSELL



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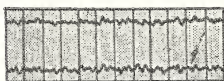


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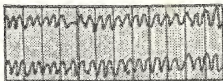
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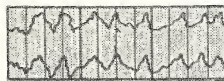
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THE ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

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Volume 8

Number 3

November, 1957

NOVELET

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What Carter had learned was vital to Earth's safety, but he only knew the barest outline. Should he risk capture in order to obtain details? If he did, then Earth would never know the danger.

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You can clip it out without mutilating the text of the magazine.

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Author, Author!

ERIC FRANK RUSSELL'S first story appeared in 1937, but he became a name to remember with "Sinister Barrier" in 1939. His most recent novel, "Three To Conquer" won a "Hugo", and has seen both hard and soft cover editions within the past year.

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MANLY BANISTER is author of a recent novel, "Conquest of Earth", and has had numerous appearances in many science fiction magazines, as well as in *Weird Tales*. A novelet of his, "Escape To Earth" is featured in the November issue of *Science Fiction Quarterly*.

CHARLES V. DeVET has been away too long, his last appearance here being "Female of the Species", in our Nov. 1955 issue. A novelet we ran in *Science Fiction Quarterly*, February 1955, "No Time For Change" still receives praise from readers.

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ROBERT ARNETT makes his debut with us in this issue, and we don't believe this will be a first-and-last, if "Audition" is any measure of his capabilities. It's a long cry from the usual trial-by-combat test.

QUEST

by

Manly Banister

(illustration by FREAS)

The robots were no help at all when it came to assembling human beings, so Helsing's only way of finding company was to find a planet where human beings existed. But . . . what was this about humans being made in two models?

"I HAVEN'T the slightest idea how a human being is put together," said Alur, the robot. "I don't recall ever having assembled one."

Helsing scowled down at his personal robot, about half his own size, grotesquely anthropomorphic. The bright sheen of its rustless alloy shell contrasted with Helsing's pink, muscular nudity.

Raised in the automatic, temperature-regulated cities of Voranamor, he needed no clothes for protection; as the only living human being among a world full of robots, he didn't need them for reasons of modesty, either.

"I've read more books than you have parts," he growled.

"All on the same subject. What I'm looking for is there, but made so tantalizingly mysterious, I don't understand it."

"You just missed the right one," suggested the robot. "You could go back and read some more."

"Go back to Voranamor? Give up the quest?" Helsing's sharp blue eyes clouded with outrage. He tossed long, pale yellow hair away from his intelligent, broad face. "I should say not!"

"It's your quest," said the robot resignedly. "Personally, I prefer Voranamor to this stuffy space ship. But don't let me tell *you* your business."

"Go away," said Helsing.



Helsing wasn't entirely sure that this was a human being—or did humans come in more than one model? It was very strange.

"Get aft and inspect the engines. Inflict yourself on Control!"

RESPONDING to orders, Alur retreated aft and inflicted himself on the Control robot. Control said they hadn't deviated from their course in umpteen days; hyperspace was sure a pretty sight when you were equipped to view it, and how much longer did they have to put up with that machine driver in the forward compartment?

Alur said, disgruntled, "Be charitable. Helsing is only human."

"He must think he'll live forever," grumbled Control, "if he plans to scour every planet in the galaxy in *his* lifetime. Besides, I'm getting tired of doing nothing but steer the ship. I had more to think about when I was a kitchen robot in the home of an old couple..."

"That was a thousand years ago," interrupted Alur. "There aren't any more old couples on Voranamor; or young ones, either. Helsing is the last of his kind. We took you out of mothballs for this trip. You ought to be grateful."

"I am...to a point. I guess there are few enough of us robots in active service."

"Only what are needed to keep the basic mechanical levels of the cities going," Alur agreed. "It isn't so bad,

now that the humans are all gone. We've more time for leisure."

"Where did they go?" Control wanted to know.

"Nowhere. They just fell over, one by one; they called it 'dying'. The human beings died off. It's something like being mothballed; somebody pulled their fuses and put them away. After Helsing stops, we'll be on our own."

"It would be lonely, being the only robot in the universe," said Control.

"Or the only human being," added Alur. A sudden hum developed in the little robot's thorax and grew loud. "That gear! I'll have to get it out of there and put in a new one. It's the third thoracic angle-of-stance adjustment; the worm is worn. Notice how I tilt a trifle to the right as I walk?"

Alur walked up and down, demonstrating. Control was sympathetic.

"I'll have a new gear turned out for you, when I get around to it. Maybe if Helsing could change a few gears in himself, he wouldn't be such a machine driver. You'd think we were witless."

"If he could, he doesn't know how. They made *us* with built-in knowledge of self-repair. They didn't seem to care so much about themselves."

Alur paused, thoughtful. "No, human beings were never like robots. How they were

manufactured was always beyond me, I never could figure it out. They made them real little, no bigger than my brain-case. They grew as time went on; got big as Helsing. Would you believe it?"

HELSING had his own quarters on the space ship, commodious enough, but confining. The voyage had already been long. He had looked in on bare, creatureless worlds, worlds of bizarre population, worlds of all kinds. Creature comforts and entertainment devices had long ago ceased to help assuage the ache inside him.

The ship was his idea; the voyage was his project. He was captain and passenger at the same time. The robots ran the ship, and very well, too.

Helsing knew nothing of his parents, or of any other human being. He could remember only the robots, who had nursed him, reared him, taught him, and fed him. In his heart was deep affection for these personalities in metal, which his people had created, long, long ago; but he could understand them no better than they could understand him.

He knew he was different from the robots, but he didn't know how or why. He was a human being; they were robots. When he was very young, he had thought that perhaps he had been the re-

sult of a mistake on the assembly line. Alur often assured him that this was not so.

He had sought enlightenment in the pictures and pages of the books that crammed Voranamor's deserted libraries. Libraries by the hundred thousand; books by the billion! How could he hope to read them all? No, if he were something different from the robots, he was at least not unique. There had been others like him before on Voranamor—there might now be others of his kind elsewhere in the universe.

All he had to do was find them.

He had never questioned the immediate response of the robots to his slightest wish, nor wondered why it was so. He had told them what he wanted, and they had produced it—the great ship that now flung itself across the void among the stars...so that he could search out another world where possibly...just possibly...

EVERY SYSTEM they approached was a new beacon, ablaze with the fire of hope. No matter that each time, so far, the hopeful glow had dimmed to the dull ashes of disappointment. Helsing still lived...and Seeing had located another solar system...dead ahead...

Alur plodded about Hel-

sing's quarters, picking up the things the man had carelessly dropped. "Perhaps this will be it," said the robot. "There are planets and the right kind of sunlight. Control says we will put on the brakes very soon."

Helsing was nervous. He paced the floor.

"I had such a nice time, talking to Control," Alur went on. "I should visit back there more often. Control told me about its dream."

"I didn't know you could dream," said Helsing. "You never sleep."

"We dream, just the same," asserted Alur. "We don't spend all our time thinking about rational things, any more than you do. Control dreamed that we were married."

"Don't be silly. Only human beings married. It means they lived together."

"Just so," said Alur. "We lived together, Control and I. We had a family of little robots."

"Are you making fun of me?" asked Helsing.

"Of course not. I'm telling you Control's dream."

Helsing frowned in puzzlement. "Did...?" He hesitated. "Did Control say—uh—how you came by the—uh—little robots?"

"We had an assembly line in the basement," said Alur. "We made them ourselves. Wasn't that splendid?"

Helsing looked ferocious.

"I want to know if you learned anything that would help me!"

"Of course not. Human beings are not robots."

HELSING continued to walk up and down. "Tell me about this new solar system coming up. What's it like?"

Alur began to spout galactic co-ordinates, spatial counter-positions, and inter-continua relationships, expressed in fourth degree mathematical logic.

"Never mind all that," Helsing said crossly. "When do we land?"

"We've already landed," replied the robot cheerfully.

"What!" Helsing sprang to the view screen. It stared at him blankly.

"Control!" Alur sang out sweetly. "Do turn on the juice in this screen, will you? Helsing wants to look outside."

Helsing looked eagerly upon a world of forest and blue mountains that hazed away in steps to a misty horizon. Control had landed them on a mountainside, and far below, a blue lake twinkled in the golden flood of light from a yellow sun. Helsing was too moved to speak.

"Surely," he breathed at last, "there *must* be human beings here!"

"As a matter of fact," said Alur, affecting boredom, "the place crawls with them. Control set us down where we

would be least likely to run into any."

"What for? I want to see some people!"

"In good time," replied Alur wisely. "It is better to study them at a distance, first."

"Let me out, then," Helsing grumbled. "I want to breathe some fresh air."

"Oh— oh!" Alur was alarmed.

"What's the matter? Tell Control to let me out!"

"I don't think," said the robot, "that Control was careful enough."

"Stop talking and open the ship!"

Alur pointed at the screen. "There is a human being out there."

HELSING'S heart leaped. He looked and beheld the creature, a long way off, lurking in the shadow of the forest. It was disappointing to make nothing of it but a spotty kind of colored movement.

"Your eyes must be better than mine," he said bitterly. "That could be anything."

"You might go out and call it over," suggested the robot.

Alur spoke gently again to Control. The wall split down the middle and drew apart. Helsing stepped out on the surface of the planet, emotion leaping within him. Human beings—*real* human beings at last! Gladness possessed him, joy, the intoxication of the moment. He did an impromptu dance on the weathered-

brown pine needles covering the ground. Pink toes flashed, contacted a bit of gray rock protruding into the open.

Helsing danced on one foot, clutched the other and yelped with anguish.

"Now you've done it!" protested Alur. "You've scared it away. What are you making like that for, anyway?"

Helsing frowned fiercely; it did no good to tell the robot about pain. He turned toward the whispering, wind-stirred forest, peering. The sunlight glinted on the fresh green of waving needles, made sepia shadows of the forest depths.

Helsing called out. "Hey! Come here!" He turned to Alur. "Where did it go?"

"It's hiding in the brush," said Alur. "I can sense it. Shall I fetch it?"

"Please do," said Helsing, feeling inferior.

THE ROBOT disappeared into the woods. Presently, there came a piercing shriek, followed by a thunderous trampling and breaking of brush that diminished into faint noise in the distance. Alur came out, lugging a limp form.

"Is that a human being?" asked Helsing, poking at it.

It was somewhat smaller than himself, with a great deal of curled, yellow hair on its head. The eyes were closed, the mouth unnatural-

ly red. In its unconscious state, it looked somehow frail and delicate.

"What are those wrappings on it?" Helsing wanted to know.

"Clothes," said Alur. "People on Voranamor used to wear them. That's how I knew it was a human being."

"It doesn't *look* very human," said Helsing, doubtfully.

"Two arms, two legs," Alur pointed out. "Head, eyes, mouth, and so forth. Those are the marks of a human being. Moreover, it's intelligent, or approximately so. It was about to climb on a four legged something and ride away when I surprised it. Did you hear the noise the creature made escaping?"

"I heard it," admitted Helsing. "Let's get this thing inside and take the wrappings off. Maybe it'll look more human."

A little later, with great disappointment, Helsing said, "It certainly isn't human! Take it back out and leave it in the brush."

"On the contrary," disagreed the robot, "it *is* human."

"It looks nothing at all like me," argued Helsing, stiffly.

"For your information," said Alur, "human beings are manufactured in two models. This is one of the other models. Wake it up and ask it what you want to know."

"It doesn't seem to be damaged," observed Helsing, look-

ing it over. "Before we wake it up, give it a shot with the hypno-learner, charged with Voranamorese. I'll talk to it."

ALLENE MORGAN awoke to a dim feeling of disorientation. Vague memories flitted through her mind, still fogged with shock. She recalled riding Star through the dappled light and shade of the pines, up and away from the ranch house at the lake. Had Star slipped and thrown her? Why had she been riding? Oh, yes. Joel. She and Joel had quarreled. He was such a bore. All he thought of was marriage. Wouldn't take no...

A feeling of urgency gripped her. Riding...riding...then...what? Where was Star? Where was she? Her eyes flew open, ranged wildly. What was this spacious room? Certainly, not the living room of her father's ranch house, nor any other room in it. Her glance passed over Alur, returned, froze. She started up.

The *Thing* in the forest! Memory came back in a stunning flood. The ship dropping down from the sky...

A pink, unclothed giant swam into distorted view. Allene choked on her fear.

"You're all right," Helsing said kindly. "Nobody will hurt you."

The syllables fell on her ears with strange sound and cadence, but she understood them. How could that be?

"Where... where am I?" she asked, in the same, alien sound and cadence. She was surprised. Talking it, too!

"You're in the ship. I want to talk to you."

Allene sat up, looked down at herself with startled horror.

"My clothes...!"

She grabbed riding breeches from the floor, scrambled into them, her back to the curiously observing giant. She gathered the rest of her clothes, flung them on, flaming with embarrassment. She knuckled the last button into place, whirled on them.

"Who are you? What do you want? You'd better let me go!"

"I am Helsing of Voranamor," he said, ignoring her outburst. "I came here in search of some human beings."

"Which ones?" she asked cautiously.

"Any!" he returned impatiently. "There are many human beings on this world. You are obviously not one yourself, but you could tell me where to find them."

Allene frowned. "Flattery will get you nowhere. I'm just as human as you are...if you are human."

SHE BACKED warily a little distance away, but, as the stranger made no overt move to harm her, her racing pulses quieted.

"Sit down," said Hel-

sing simply. "Let me tell you about myself."

He told her about himself, the robots, and Voranamor. Allene palmed yellow curls away from her round, pretty face. Her blue eyes quite matched Helsing's for alert intelligence.

He smiled happily at her understanding. "I have been so lonely, and I have come a very long way. The human beings of this world can give me the technical knowledge I seek, to take back to Voranamor."

Allene looked around at the sumptuous appointments of the ship, obviously awed. She chose the opportunity for some rapid thinking. She had ridden for about an hour that morning. Star, running in fright along the forest trail, would make it back to the ranch in a third of that time, or less. When the horse returned riderless, her father and the hands would ride out in search of her. Perhaps even Joel would come along. She contrasted her mental image of Joel with the magnificent physique of Helsing. Joel wasn't in it.

"We're pretty careful with technical knowledge nowadays," she said cautiously, "but maybe the President could help you."

"Who?"

"The President of the United States. He's sort of in charge of all the scientific and technical information in

this country, you know. Of course, he won't tell *us* about it, so I don't know why he would tell you."

She looked around, anxiously. "How do I get out of here? I really ought to be going. My folks will be worried..."

THE WAY she kept throwing in English words when Voranamorese had no equivalent confused Helsing. He understood, however, that she wanted to leave. After the initial shock of viewing Allene's appearance had worn thin, he had begun to think that she looked a little bit of all right. He was now willing to concede that she *did* look human, especially with her wrappings on.

But her words had him worried. The information he sought was so secret that only one man on this whole world knew it! He looked unhappily at Alur. The robot wagged its head in commiseration.

"I might as well warn you," Allene put in hastily, misconstruing the exchange of glances between the two for stubborn intent to hold her captive, "that my horse has let them know at the ranch that something has . . . to me. My people will be coming to look for me."

"You should have caught that horse-thing, too," Helsing said to the robot.

"You don't know what you're saying!" protested Alur.

Helsing turned to Allene. "You may as well stay until your people get here. Tell me, you really are a human being, aren't you? Alur says there are two models. You obviously are not a *he*, like me."

"I believe you are the last man of your race!" said Allene. "Otherwise, you'd know I'm a *she*!"

Helsing nodded, glumly. "Just my luck...after I've searched half the galaxy for humans like myself!"

"Most men would be tickled to death to find a human like me, anywhere in the old galaxy!" snapped Allene.

A FLICKER of movement on the viewscreen attracted her attention.

"There's my folks, now!" She peered closely. A file of horsemen came trotting out of the woods. "Yep! That's Dad...there's Slim and Hank..." Her tone of excitement dropped to a dismal mutter. "And there's Joel!"

Helsing looked over her shoulder. "Those are your people?"

"Yes. The big one, on the bay in front, is my father!"

"What's a father?"

"You'll find out, if he thinks you've been improper." She shivered. "Boy, won't Joel be annoyed...when he finds I've spent the last hour with you!"

"Why should he be?" asked Helsing, puzzled. "Is Joel human?"

"Yes, and a jealous one. He wants to marry me."

"I know what that is," said Helsing naively. He regarded Joel's image on the screen with jealous interest. "Do you want to live with *him*?"

Woman's instinct sensed what Helsing did not even know he expressed. Allene shrugged, with an arch expression. "I don't know. I may!"

Helsing scowled. The men on horseback picked their way cautiously around the ship from Voranamor, looking it over, talking excitedly among themselves.

"You are the first human beings I have met in the galaxy," said Helsing, worriedly. "I must at least try to get the information I want."

"I would suggest," said Allene, "that you don't let anybody know you're here for a while. You would be mobbed! After you've learned your way around, we'll try to get you in touch with somebody who can help you. We can put you up at the ranch, if you'd like. Dad would be tickled to death...he's always been interested in the stars. And Mom would love to have you. You can come with me now..."

She stopped her mouth with the back of her hand, stared wide-eyed.

"Good heavens...you need clothes!"

"Wrappings!" groaned Helsing. "Must I?"

"Just let *me* out," she said

succintly. "I'll send one of the boys back from the ranch with some duds."

HELSING had never known that life could have such spice, such peace and contentment. Living at the Morgan Dude Ranch, among other human beings, was an experience he reveled in...in spite of the rather tight-fitting overalls, shirt and shoes he had been outfitted with—extras of Dad Morgan's.

Helsing understood that the ranch entertained guests during the summer, but the season was early yet, and Joel was the only guest present. Joel wasn't really a guest, either; he merely hung around, hoping Allene would marry him. Somehow, Helsing was glad she wouldn't do it.

Bulging at the seams and pinching at the toes, he wandered over the ranch with Allene and the inseparable robot, marveling at everything he saw. He was unaware of the ludicrous figure he cut in the borrowed clothes; but he was sensitive enough to know how foolish he would look if he tried to ride one of the horses, as Allene suggested.

Even after a week of living with the family, of talking, asking and answering questions, Helsing still did not understand much about terrestrial social life. He tried to make friends with the hands, but Hank and Slim

acted nervous when he was around, tried to teach him to roll a cigaret, and failed. The ranch animals shied away from Alur, no doubt frightened by his shell of gleaming, rustproof alloy.

Joel was surly, and Helsing deliberately ignored him. Instinct raised a barrier between them that Helsing, for one, was willing to let it stand.

NONE OF the ranch people would allow themselves to be persuaded to enter the space ship for a turn at the hypo-learner. Therefore, Allene served as interpreter, doing valiant duty in the question-and-answer field between Helsing and her father. Helsing liked Dad Morgan, and answered his questions willingly. He also liked Mom Morgan. Allene's mother had a profusion of white hair, a kindly smile, and wide, candid blue eyes, very like Allene's. She went to no end of trouble to discover what foods Helsing favored and to prepare special dishes for him.

Helsing spent carefree days lounging in the shade of the blossoming apple trees with Allene, listening to the droning vibration of bees on the cool air. It was good to be alive, he thought—good to be with Allene. He told her about his childhood on Voranamor, how the robots had taught him and cared for him. She answered his ques-

tions about Earth, but the complex of her answers remained hazy to him. He could make little sense of so far-flung a culture on short notice.

Alur leaned boredly against my apple tree, humming softly in the thorax.

"I haven't said a word!" protested Allene.

"I was talking to Alur," said Helsing. He pulled a blade of grass and bit it. "Hear that hum? It's unusual."

"It's my stance control gear," said the robot apologetically. "I haven't got around to replacing it. I'm sorry if it bothers you."

"I can't get over it," murmured Allene. "*That's* a machine, yet it seems almost human!"

Helsing grinned. "I'll say so! I just found out robots can dream. Control dreamed it was married to Alur. They had an assembly line in the basement, where they made little robots."

Allene got up and started away. Helsing jumped up and followed.

"Where are you going? What did I do?"

She turned a cold glance on him. "Stranger to our world, or not, Mr. Helsing, I *don't* care for your insinuations!"

JOEL APPEARED, ducking under the limb of the apple tree. He looked sourly at Helsing said something to

Allene. The girl tossed her head in Helsing's direction and walked off arm in arm with the interloper.

Helsing sat down and glared at Alur. "Are you sure there are two models of humans?"

"Positive," asserted the robot.

Helsing puzzled the situation, wondering what had possessed Allene.

"If I am human," he said to Alur, "and Allene is human, there must be a reason for having two models. What is it? Did you see how angry she got? I mentioned little robots..."

"I was never one to snoop in human affairs," Alur defended. "I don't profess to understand them. I just do my duty, that's all."

"Why did people marry on Voranamor, Alur?"

"I don't know," the robot answered truthfully. "It was some kind of human institution. They all lived that way—a couple here, a couple there. Come to think of it—they had a word they used a great deal. Love."

"Love," murmured Helsing. "Do I love Allene? I would certainly like to marry her!"

"Talk sense," grumbled Alur.

"A lot of help you are," sneered Helsing. "How long did you hang around humans? You must have had five or six chassis before

this one. A thousand years? And you don't know the first thing about humans!"

"I didn't *live* with them," reproved Alur. "I just served them—as I do you."

"Ha!" said Helsing. "I've been doing better by myself. How did I know it wasn't proper for a grown man to be spoon-fed by a robot? You let me think it was all right. I learned different from Allene. Now I can feed myself, thank you."

"The duty of a robot is to serve," murmured Alur religiously. "May I serve you with a suggestion?"

"If you think it has value, you may."

"Find out from that girl, or somebody, what you came here to learn; and let's get back to Voranamor. The climate here is too humid. I think I'm beginning to rust." The robot looked critically at its gleaming thorax of rustproof alloy.

"**YOU** SAW what happened when I tried to lead into the subject," Helsing pointed out. "She got up and flounced off with Joel. These people have turned all their science and technology over to one man, it seems, and it insults them when you try to talk about it."

"In your place," said Alur coldly, "I shouldn't have wasted so much time. When you had her in your power

in the ship was when you should have asked her."

Helsing hung his head and pulled at the grass. "I could have, couldn't I?" he admitted feebly.

He lifted his glance to the grandeur of the forested mountains ringing the ranch at the edge of the lake.

"As soon as I find out what I came here for, we'll have to go back to Voranamor, Alur, and get things started. I like it here. I... I thought I could put the question off... until I felt more like leaving..."

PERHAPS Alur was right, Helsing thought as the family gathered that evening in the long, heavily-raftered living room of the ranch house. He liked it here, no doubt about that, but it was high time he was leaving.

He brooded, while Allene translated the questions her father put to him and translated back the answers he gave. Finally, Dad and Mom Morgan excused themselves and went to bed.

Suddenly, it was all very dull and boring, and Helsing looked toward the robot, as if seeking in that creature of metal and subtle electronic currents a solution to the enigma he had come so far to solve.

"Ask her now," suggested Alur.

Joel still sat up with them, suspiciously alert and sullen. He was always around, Helsing thought with a trace of

rancor. Of course, Joel couldn't understand the conversation that went on between Helsing and Allene, so he doubtless thought they were talking about him.

Helsing drew a deep breath ordering his thoughts.

"Allene," he said. "It is time now I went back to Voranamor. But first I must get the information I came for. You must locate for me the person who can answer my question."

She glanced at him, startled. "Certainly...but what...?"

Helsing drew a deep breath and plunged ahead. "One thing I must know. How do you make little human beings?"

She drew back, astonished. In another moment, the real meaning of his earnest question might have penetrated. Joel filled the breach. "Is that lunk trying to get fresh?"

She whirled. "No! Joel—don't!"

Whatever had been going on in the frustrated Joel's consciousness while he sat there, Helsing would never know. A fistful of knuckles, connected to the end of Joel's long arm, slammed against the side of his head and knocked him sprawling from his chair. Helsing rolled across the carpet, scrambled to his feet.

"Command me to punish him for striking you!" cried Alur, incensed, all the little robot's radio-activated loyalty aroused by the deed.

"Never mind!" barked Helsing. He wiped a smear of blood from his cheek.

JOEL STOOD panting, glaring, arms a kimbo. He swung again, and Helsing caught his fist. Seizing the other, he brought the two together, slung Joel like a sack over his shoulder. Anger, deep and terrible, churned inside him. He strode wordless from the house, Joel kicking and yelping on his back.

Helsing's lips were white and grim. He had never felt anger in his life before. Annoyed he had been, yes. Piqued. But burning, hateful anger—never!

Allene ran after them, pounding on Helsing's shoulder and ribs, pleading with him to release Joel. Helsing paid no heed. He was through, finished with Earth, he would go back to Voranamor and live out his life with the robots, alone, and better off for it. But first, he had to do what he was about to do.

Helsing strode across the ranch yard in the moonlight. At the horse trough by the corral, he paused, dumped Joel in, and wheeled toward the forest trail. Joel splashed and yelled.

Allene pulled at Helsing's arm. "Where are you going?"

"Back to Voranamor!" he growled stiffly. "If you people are human, I am a freak. I belong on my own world."

She hauled him around, furiously.

"What's the matter with you, you big ape?" He thought there were tears in her eyes, but the moonlight was not bright. He didn't know why there should be. He halted, a feeling of depthless vacancy inside him.

He said, bitterly, "I asked you a question. The answer to it means a great deal to me. I..."

Her look was incredulous. "Don't...don't you really know?" she whispered.

"If I knew," he ground out, "would I be here? I would have repeopled Voranamor long ago!"

"Sit down!" she said kindly.

HE SAT ON a nearby stone and looked at her. She knelt in front of him. Joel had pulled himself dripping from the trough and slunk off toward the house.

She said, "I must be just beginning to understand. Our human prudery, dear Helsing, sometimes confuses things terribly. You think human beings are manufactured like robots, don't you?"

"Aren't they?" he challenged.

She laughed, a silly little giggle. "Oh...forgive me, Helsing! I am not laughing at you...really!"

She looked up into his shadowed face. The moon was on her own, showing the mirth there...and something

else Helsing could not name.

"How can I make you understand, without a course in applied biology, Helsing? Do you know..." Her eyes sparkled, and she winked conspiratorially. "Joel is dreadfully jealous of you!"

"Jealous?" He was uncomprehending.

"He thinks you want to marry me!"

"I do," he replied simply. "What is wrong about that? But you want to marry Joel, and all I really want is..."

She put a cool finger against his lips. "I know, I know." She puckered her smooth forehead thoughtfully. "You must forget about going back to Voranamor, Helsing."

"Why must I?"

"DON'T YOU see, poor dear? You've been cared for so thoroughly by the robots, you are practically incapable of caring for yourself. Why, the thing even fed you with a spoon, until I taught you different! And, if you hadn't got very angry tonight—angry enough to fight your own battle—you might even have let Alur fight for you! I think it's the first time in your life you have been angry. I also think, if you *do* go back to Voranamor, you will die there... and that will be the end of your race, won't it?"

"Yes," he agreed miserably.

"I can see Voranamor now," she said dreamily, "just by

closing my eyes. Robots everywhere, thick as fleas. Haven't you any idea what made your race die out, Helsing?... Too much service! *They died of plain boredom!*"

He regarded her gloomily. "That is probably true. But dead though it is, Voranamor is my world. There is nothing here for me, except fighting... feelings I don't understand... anger!"

"*Anger!*" she cried. "Anger is good, Helsing! We of Earth are an angry people! Anger has built the world we know and love. Anger against terrorism made us band together into nations; and anger against oppression made us free! When man has nothing more to anger him, nothing more to make him rise up and fight... Well, we *Earthmen* aren't dying out, Helsing!" She paused. "We don't have robots, either."

Alur moved self-consciously, gleaming in the moonlight. "I think she wants you to stay, Helsing."

Helsing looked at the robot helplessly. "How can I do that?"

"Marry her and find out."

HELISING looked a question at Allene.

She nodded. "I think... Alur is right, Helsing."

Helsing turned back to the robot. "What are you waiting for?"

"Your permission to serve," said the robot humbly.

Helsing felt Allene's hand clasped in both of his. Her flesh was firm between his palms.

"Serve me then no longer," said Helsing. "Go back to Voranamor."

The robot turned. From the forest path came the humming of a worn gear, faint sound that diminished into silence. Helsing looked stricken. He started to his feet, took a step after Alur. He felt Alene's tug on his arm.

He said, looking down at her, "You couldn't have meant it!"

"But I did! Yes...I did, my dear. For a while, I didn't know. You were so helpless...so...I don't know what. I pitied you. Then...what you

did to Joel showed that your manhood isn't all on the surface. I know now you have the quality I want...in the man I love!"

Helsing didn't know what to do, so Allene did it for him. His first kiss was an experience, unexpected, unsought, vital, satisfying. Instinct helped. He put his arms around her and held her close.

He said, "Alur is gone, and I shall be sorry for it. But it does not matter, now that I have you, Allene. Not even the secret I was looking for matters..."

She squeezed him joyfully, happily. "We'll get around to that, too," she murmured, and kissed him again.

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EARLY BIRD

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Sooner or later, every spy has to face this problem: should he return with an incomplete but vital message, or risk capture for the sake of more complete information?

THE SHIP made not a sound indicative of propulsive effort; it was going somewhere, and going mighty fast, but there was no audible evidence. Indeed, the silence was a vast one, an utter stillness, as if Creation had not yet been accomplished.

Outside the ports lay nothing save appalling darkness; in effect, there was no outside. There was only inside, a place where light shined and life breathed—a tiny world of one's own, sole occupant of a cosmos compounded of absolute black.

Here a man could sit and think of himself as a diminutive god, awaiting the birth of multi-million night-lights all around; he could think of himself as dead, yet endowed with dreadful realization of it; or he could think of himself as a bedbound dreamer. In a loose way, the latter came nearest to the truth.

Back on Earth an individual could retire, close his eyes, and dream very realistically that he was strolling around on Melisande—a happy planet in A. Centauri. Purely from the mental viewpoint he would really be on Melisande



The pursuers saw a lone figure by one of the ships.

for a little while, lacking only his body. Distance covered: four and a half light-years. Transition time: approximately one-fifth of a second. The velocity of light was sluggish compared with the formidable speed of the human mind.

IT WAS A favorite debating subject for Earth's philosophers and metaphysicists whether the velocity of human thought represented the ultimate speed. None could be sure, one way or the other. Elsewhere in the crowded immensity of space might lurk a species of faster thinkers. Ultra-rapid thought, argued some, was conceivable and therefore possible.

Anyway, long, long years of speculation, theory, research and discovery had combined to put the man in the ship where he was: a minor god in a metal planetoid suspended in sable silence.

His name was Carter, Gregory Carter; no one had ever called him Greg. He exemplified the thin, wiry type that can plug determinedly along after speedier men have dropped. He had steady, slightly stubborn eyes; bristly hair; a sharp nose; and prominent cheekbones. Carter was the brightest orphan found after a tedious searching-out of the world's orphans.

In his childhood he'd received kindness without love; in adulthood he knew respect

without affection. These denials were part of his education, for which a dozen preceding generations had schemed and planned. What they'd wanted and what they'd got was a technician cum intelligence-agent devoid of family ties, lacking any nostalgic yearning for Earth, but trained to carry on with a given task while there remained breath in his body. They wanted someone who'd face death with none around to mourn—a sort of Kamikaze pilot of space.

RISKS WERE considerable. More than a century ago, the first rudimentary ship of this non-reactive kind had shivered into invisibility under robotic control, and resolidified after five minutes of its own time; in Earth-time, the ship had been gone ten days. Ships numbers two to ten, also unmanned, had then vanished. Of these, seven had returned, two had disappeared for ever; no man knew why. There were guesses but no proof: an extremely slight error in carefully-adjusted return coordinates; a mild quake in the bed of the Pacific. . .

Dolman had gone in the first occupied extra-temporal sphere, switched it back into space, and found himself sitting in Jupiter's gravitational grasp. He'd done a double-switch back to Earth before the grasp could crush him.

Total time: twenty-two minutes. Experts had derived much valuable data from that escape, found ways of giving more distance in less time; but there was no better control over point of emergence.

Later, Dolman tried again; he went out beyond Pluto and was back in fifty-four minutes. The third time, he never returned. Then Yates took over for five trips; for the sixth one: no ship, no Yates. After that, a succession of them, able, willing but doomed if they persisted in bucking the odds too long. Armitage was the unluckiest, making a one-way journey into nothingness at the first attempt. Mason set the record; he'd returned from twenty-one trips when the bigbrains decided that his experience had become too valuable to lose.

Now, the name at the end of the roster was that of Carter. Assets: special training and the best ship yet built. Liabilities: a bigger and better chance of switching the ship into instantaneous disruption within the belly of a strange sun, plus the fact that, if he escaped disaster, he would be gone only a few days—representing, in Earth-time, about four thousand years.

FOUR THOUSAND years.

Gregory Carter sat and brooded over the prospect without emotion or regret. They'd made him capable of saying goodbye forever to the

way of life he had known, the faces with which he'd become familiar. But it was permissible to ponder the return, assuming that he would survive and make it. Four thousand years was a hefty slice of time—quite long enough for early history to become garbled, for names to sink into oblivion, for original purposes to be forgotten.

Across so great a stretch of years civilizations could rise and fall; as civilizations had done time and again. It would be unfortunate if Carter reappeared on Earth coincidentally with the peak of a negative phase, finding the conquest of space forgotten, and himself regarded as an inexplicable arrival from the sky.

The only question he had asked, the only criticism he had made, concerned the hugeness of this time-span. "Why so long?"

"It won't be long for you; only for us."

"That doesn't explain the necessity," he'd persisted.

"Look, with rockets we've reached the Moon, Venus and Mars. We've scouted the Asteroid Belt. That's as far as we've got, or will ever get, with a device that squirts itself along."

"So?"

"WITH EXTRA-TEMPORAL spheres, such restrictions cease. We now have the means to reach through space to far that we

don't know our limits. Small-scale emigration began before you were born; already humankind is established in small numbers on the three nearest solar systems."

"I know that much."

"You will understand, then, that it is illogical for us to spread haphazardly into the cosmos. To do so is to dilute our numbers and weaken ourselves against the day when immense strength may be needed. Therefore, it is best for us to advance system by system along a preplanned route where suitable systems lie thickest and closest."

"Such a route has been chosen?" Carter asked.

"Astronomical experts have selected the best. It is along our own arm of the great spiral which is the Milky Way. The nearer we get to the root of that arm, the more fertile the starfield before us. Problems of superfast transport of great masses of people and materials are being attacked and solved daily. Technical obstacles are all surmountable and will be overcome one by one in due time—even the creation of a positive safety factor for blind re-emergence. We have only one serious worry."

"And that is...?"

"What we can do, others can do, may be about to do it or already may be doing it. If their chosen direction of spread happens to oppose ours..."

"War?"

"**N**OT NECESSARILY; not even probably—but possibly. Forewarned is forearmed. We shall have a considerable advantage if we know of their existence before they know of ours, if we have learned what to expect before they've had time to gain warning—assuming that there really is, or soon will be, a 'they' somewhere along our line of advance."

"I see," said Carter.

"So we're sending you right to the root of the arm where systems cluster thickest, where by the simple mathematics of probability one is likeliest to find intelligent life. It is impossible to get you there and back in less than four thousand Earth-years. We have no choice but to put up with it."

"By the same token, an enemy located there could not reach here in less time, either. The menace lies in the far future," he pointed out.

"We are thinking of the future which shrinks as rapidly as we move outward," they told him. "Man progresses because he does not live wholly in today. He lives partly in tomorrow, even if that tomorrow be forty centuries hence." A pause, a frown, then, "And for all we know, so may others."

IT MADE sense. Spies had been needed since the start of history, and in all likeli-

hood would continue to be wanted until the end of it. So long as any group's survival depended upon advance information, so long must the more fatalistic members stick out their necks to obtain it.

Therefore, here was Gregory Carter, going somewhere while sitting nowhere, hell-bent for the theoretical danger-zone, while poised in extra-spatial darkness beyond reach of any living form.

Meanwhile, a meter on the wall gradually inched a thin black line toward a thin red one. When the two coincided, the switch would function automatically, shunting Carter back into the material scheme of things, or into superswift oblivion.

Within the all-encompassing black of this dimension, there was as yet no way of determining adjacency of material masses, either mentally or instrumentally. To rejoin the cosmos was to jump back into the free void, or else try compel two bodies to occupy a given space simultaneously.

The black line edged along two fractions nearer. Two hairline shifts, *tick-tick*, like that—while elsewhere a generation had travelled from birth to middle-age. Carter decided not to watch the meter any more. Moving to the nearest port, he gazed into the appalling dark and waited for starry brightness, or the big bang.

II

THERE WAS no physical sensation when transition took place—only a faint click, and a slight shudder through the frame of the vessel. The stars came out and made a sparkling panorama.

Gregory Carter was sweating a little as he looked at them, but he did not linger to drink in the sight. He turned to the instrument-board and absorbed its information with the swiftness of trained understanding. It told him that the sphere was in motion, that the motion was acceleratory, that the cause was the gravitational field of a great dead mass from which he was distant by eight diameters.

It wasn't difficult to cope with that. A quick adjustment of controls, a flick of the switch, a momentary obscuration of the starfield, then he was beyond reach of that dangerous attraction and again had lights burning all around.

AT ONCE, the ship began to drift in a new direction. The pace was so slow that it could be ignored for a while. Contrary to ancient theories, no point in space was free from drag; to escape one gravitational field was merely to enter another, the first weakening while the second strengthened. Even a spiral nebula, made a misty whorl by sheer distance, ex-

erted its enormously attenuated attraction. Any point of balance between opposing pulls was the point of chief susceptibility to a third, fourth, tenth or twentieth field, or to any combination thereof. No point was completely free of gravitational attraction, anywhere.

The ship rolled in space, presenting its most massive section to the major pull at any given time. As a result, the interior base of that section was always the floor on which a man could stand and move, without floating around. His weight might oscillate between that of a moose and that of a mouse, but he could move and retain control of his motions. He could spit on the floor and the expectoration stayed there, fastened by the strongest drag out of a million and one possible drags.

On board were devices unknown to olden times, devices that were highly sensitive to the gravitational fields pervading space, though useless in the lightless, lifeless gloom beyond space. Here, amid the stars, these instruments could detect and analyze the attractions of the nearest fields, define which were solitary and which were not, classify the primary of each solar system, and state the number of planets therein.

So Carter did not have to stand at a port and peer through a telescope like a

conqueror of the Andes surveying the distant Pacific. Neither did he have to keep long, attentive watch on a battery of fluorescent screens. It was easier than that.

MMETER NUMBER ONE pointed its needle. Its color-slot held a blue dot; its number counter showed the figure seven. This meant that in the indicated direction lay a blue sun with seven planets. Its distance was shown below the dial in terms of in-and-out switching time—namely, four minutes. There were eighty such meters defining the nearest components of the star-field that glowed all around, above, below.

Nothing more was required of Carter than to look them over and take his pick. He chose a sun resembling Sol, on the logical assumption that a similar sun was likeliest to incubate the talent both possessed and feared—to wit: intelligence.

Other kinds of suns might warm to life on their peculiar planets other strange, non-human forms equally capable of constructive thought. That was wholly theoretical. What a Sol-type could produce was known, a self-evident fact. Eight thousand millions of thinking, scheming bipeds bore witness to it.

Carter picked a sun superficially like Sol, the only one of that class among the eighty

stars adjacent at this time. He switched, entered utter blackness for the required period, and reappeared some minutes later, just beyond the orbit of the outermost planet.

This lonely body was not visible, presenting its dark side to him and totally devoid of an atmospheric halo. The instruments told him exactly where it lay: a mere switch-flip nearer the sun and going fast along its great orbit.

H E SWITCHED again, planted the ship squarely on the orbit, behind the body and near enough to be dragged along with it. An antiquated rocket-ship might have plunged to immediate destruction; this ship did not. Sheer proximity of the pull made automechanisms leap into action. Within the space of a heartbeat, they had taken the measure of the planet's rotating magnetic field and loaded the ship's shell to exploit it.

Suspended in space at its chosen distance, the vessel slowly accelerated until it was whirling around the planet in a balanced orbit. At that moment, Gregory Carter became the man on the moon.

From this vantage point, he studied the planet with care, not expecting to find cities or any extensive signs of civilization on a world so cold and airless. All the same, such examination was necessary. It was a foregone conclusion

that if the inner worlds held life comparable with his own, then this outer world should have at least one emergency spaceport, either buried deep in the rock or sitting under a plastoid dome.

Nothing was there, nothing. The planet was gaunt, badly scared, and deserted—a sterile lump of plasma whereon no foot, paw, or walking-pad had ever trod. For some reason, Carter felt disappointed. Had the evidence been otherwise he'd have sensed his first thrill of alarm. That was the emotional gamut of the long-range spy: either he must get a scare or feel frustrated by the lack of it.

H E JUMPED inward to the next world, having to go partway round the sun to catch it; that planet, too, was dead. And so it went on. Switch, switch, switch until each of nine planets in turn had acquired for a little while a new and tiny moon, in the shape of a dull metal sphere coming from the star-mists.

All this was a waste of time, which Carter accepted philosophically because it was to be expected. One comfort was that a day, week or month spent here was a day, week or month back on Earth, and not a millenium or two as it would have been had he dawdled in hyperspace. He was operating where hours were plain, straightforward hours and not lifetimes in terms of the home planet.

On this job, a certain amount of futility was inevitable. He was seeking a hypothetical needle in an extremely large haystack. It would be the acme of luck to find it on the first try, or even at the fiftieth attempt.

It did not occur to him for one moment that the odds would be reduced substantially if what he sought was simultaneously looking for him. Ordinary horse sense told him that a spy cannot be hunted before his existence is known or suspected.

But the sense of a horse isn't enough, even for problems with obvious solutions.

HE CONSULTED his instruments again. The board had changed its general analysis, clue to his shift in space. Of the eighty systems recorded by the meters, about thirty had been shown before; they were still among those nearest to him. The other fifty were newcomers. Among the latter were two Sol-type suns, one with two planets, one with twelve.

The ship made leaps through transpatial darkness, first to one sun, then to the other. The score amounted to eleven sterile worlds against three with vegetable life. One of the latter also possessed insects and creeping things—nothing sufficiently formidable to be deemed a foe, actually or potentially.

Now the instrument-board

listed another and different eighty systems without a Sol-type sun among the lot, ex-gated. This lack of suspects did not stall him. Carter took a look over the starfield visible from his ports; he picked a glowing cloud where sun-clustered thickets. The chosen sector meant he'd have to cover considerable distance, but that distance was a mere fraction of the vast span he'd already overcome. By means of his ship, human technology had reduced the cosmos to traversable size in much the same way that the home world once had been reduced by the locomotive and the jet-plane.

THE VESSEL vanished from the mundane scheme of things, popped back into it near the middle of the cluster. Again Gregory Carter sweated as light burst through the ports. He'd no time to think of the risk he'd taken. The ship hustled into fast velocity and he had to switch position twice, in rapid succession—first to escape a powerful sun-drag, second to get high above an almost unseeable swarm of asteroids.

This time the meters told of seven brothers to Sol, six of them with planets, one without. He chose one that had eleven worlds in its family and was not far from another of its kind. Again he got just beyond the orbit of the outermost planet and made

ready to maneuver into a satellite orbit. It was then the alarm-bell shrilled.

At first he couldn't believe it. With hands on controls and mouth agape, Carter stared at the bell while his mind reluctantly accepted what his ears had heard. Then he reacted as taught, swiftly, urgently, without looking outside for the cause. The ship dived out of space and into the sable dark where a thousand vessels could hang for a million years and never find each other.

It was necessary to hide for only a few seconds that, at the danger-point, would represent a period of time plenty long enough to try the patience of a saint. Then he returned to the same position as before, made a jump to catch up with the system's drift, and another one to position himself near the outermost planet.

AT THAT point, he eyed the bell expectantly. Nothing happened. The ship commenced its circling around the planet. Still nothing happened. He examined the planet, saw a rocky surface deeply scarred with immense ruts. One face of it was enough. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred the daylight face of any rotating body told the same story as that written upon the night-time side.

The next planet inward was no more informative: similar

rockiness, similar scars. The one after that lay hidden beneath a blanket of noxious gases. The next was rocky, airless, devoid of scars, but had something like a spotted oblong near its equator. Carter tightened his orbit to get nearer and have a better look. The alarm-bell jangled with a vigor that made his tried and tested nerves twang like the strings of a harp.

His startled glance shot round the circular row of ports a moment before his hand moved at the controls and the lights went out all over the sky. This time he did not take refuge in rolling years. He flipped in and out of the cosmos with baffling rapidity and some foolhardiness, jumping the ship planet nearer to the sun. It was the flea technique: hop around fast, and one is hard to catch.

It would have been easy to get right out of the entire sector and reappear someplace far away and a good deal safer. But Carter had not arced across a great vault of the heavens merely to bolt at the first threat. He had come for information, and what he'd glimpsed through the ports was more than enough to assure him that he had come to the right place.

III

HIS EXAMINATION of each successive planet amounted to no more than a five seconds' look

at the sunward side. That continued until he reached the fourth planet from the primary; there he caught brief but thrilling view of towns, roads, and jungles.

Gregory Carter let the panoramic camera snap once before the ship sprang into blackness and came out again at a different angle and distance. The camera snapped a second time. Another jump; another snap. He repeated half a dozen times.

If anything was trying to track him from one moment to the next, it was finding the going tough. And rightly so; only a fool makes pursuit easy for the opposition, and fools are not chosen for espionage work.

This leaping out of and back into the material cosmos was good escape technique, but had its drawbacks. It built up the odds that he would enter a portion of space already occupied, and added years to his return date. Too much of it would add centuries.

So he had to reach a quick decision whether he would bite at the bait out there. As he dealt with this problem, Carter still studied the world in a rapid succession of glances while the ship flickered in and out of nothingness like an erratic mirage within the void.

Well-planned, well-built towns in close proximity with

the sprawling jungles meant that this was a colonial planet of fairly recent establishment. Its older, better-developed, and more formidable parent-world lay elsewhere, perhaps relatively near to hand, perhaps in the adjacent Sol-system. The parent-world, wherever it was located, would hold a greater wealth of information but obtaining it would be riskier. Moreover, to find the parent-world he'd have to resume his pot-luck seeking among the stars.

THE ONE BIG thing Carter wanted to know, and had to learn if possible, was whether anyone had the brains and gumption to become a major obstacle in the path of human expansion. A young civilization still beating back the jungle was mute evidence that some life form had the itch to spread itself around and the ability to do it. Finally, a planet in plain view is worth two out of sight.

He had to land and have a look around, but not get caught. Acquisition of a veritable library of data was of no use whatever unless it could be taken back to Earth. He must not be caught. Even if these people were friendly, they would want information in exchange for any given, whereas Earth wanted it in exchange for nothing.

The alarm bell rang.

One-tenth of a second be-

fore the ship plunged into concealing darkness, Carter saw again the monster metal thing floating outside his ports and drawing him closer with its own attraction. It was so huge and so near that he could not tell its size and shape. He had a vague notion that, like his own vessel, it was spherical and perhaps fifty to sixty times bigger.

REMAINING in the never-long enough to make the menace wait seven years, he employed his brief time considering what to do with the ship. While he prowled the land, it could be suspended in hyperspace and brought back to the world's surface at a pre-set time; but if circumstances made the rendezvous unsuitable, if he had urgent need of the ship before or after the appointed moment, he'd be dead out of luck. Or just plain dead.

Alternately, he could hang the ship in real space, in a satellite orbit, and call it down with his pocket sympath any time he needed it. That meant dumping it in clear view, and inviting its confiscation by the things operating the metal monster.

The third choice was to land it in the jungle, camouflage it from overhead observation and switch on its little bleeper that would guide him back to it when lost. Yes, that was the best solution.

Besides, that which lies on the ground cannot fall.

Carter took a major chance on embedding himself for keeps by making half a dozen superfast switchings that jumped him into position a few hundred feet above the northward jungle. Automatic shell-loading held the vessel suspended like a floating bubble. Then the trickle-discharge operated and the bubble sank to earth amid a snapping of brittle branches, a crashing of thin tree-trunks and harsh screams of creatures unseen.

That done, he wound out the net and spreader provided for just such a situation. A gadget creating invisibility would have been better, but a jump into hyperspace was the nearest they'd ever got to that. The metal tubes telescoped high from the ship's top, splayed themselves apart and held the net at full stretch.

IT TOOK more than an hour to plug the meshes with tree-tips, branches and leafy twigs, making a thorough job of concealment. There was a chance that a sky-flying searcher could discover the bubble of metal instrumentally. The risk was not a great one, and in any case had to be accepted. He'd picked a spot where his own meters had responded to underground deposits of ore. It

isn't easy to detect the addition of one hundred tons to a near-surface mass of one million tons.

Satisfied that the ship now was as well hidden as could be managed, he switched on its bleeper. That was not as risky a tactic as it seemed. The thing beeped very briefly at pre-set intervals, calling only in the plane of the planet's curvature and screened from the vertical. It affected only its own especial sympathy. The likelihood of enemy ears raking the ether, picking up strange impulses and tracing them to source, was as small as that of choosing the one correct number from all possible numbers.

Carter shoved a big, ugly gun into the heavy holster on his right thigh. The thing loomed in plain sight, a bit like a pocket cannon, and was sufficiently enticing to induce any captor to grab it with glee. Nine times out of ten the captor would then consider him disarmed, as was intended. An obvious prize often has a blinding effect with respect to hidden ones. Next to his skin he had another gun, very tiny but vicious. Also a camera, the size of a postage-stamp. In the hollow between a little toe and the next one he had a shaped pellet which, in the last resort, would face an enemy with the dismal fact that not one revealing word can be enojled from the dead.

IV

LOCKING the ship, Gregory Carter set forth through the jungle, heading for the southward fringe beyond which stood half a dozen villages and a medium-sized town. The going was not difficult. Vegetation sprawled thickly, but lacked the impassable tangles of Earth's oldtime green hells. The atmosphere was much like that of Earth, though not quite as heavy. He was a fraction lighter himself, too.

He covered eleven miles in three hours without seeing a bird or encountering a large animal. Vague forms had scuttled away from him into the deeper shadows; tiny lizard-like creatures had bolted up tree-trunks and found refuge in the higher branches. This was innocuous world, apparently—one that would have been very suitable for human habitation if others of unknown power had not already staked their claim.

How many more claims were they about to make, and how speedily were they able to make them? If a claim were disputed, what could they do about it? He was pondering these questions as he reached the edge of the trees because one thing was obvious, namely, that he was in a haunt of potential foes. When two lifeforms want radically different things, there is no

competition, no argument; they can live and let live. But when two lifeforms need, seek, find, and grab a specific and somewhat rare kind of environment, trouble comes sooner or later.

Creation could be of infinite size, yet hold a strictly limited number of planets sufficiently like Earth to be occupied in comfort. Such plums in the heavenly orchard might be far too few to insure eternal peace and amity. Therefore it was up to Carter to gain the measure of the enemy.

IN THE SHADOWS of the trees he sat and waited until dusk came. Between him and the nearest village lay a big, grassy area, pockmarked with small craters and littered with torn roots. Here, determined hands had set to work and driven back the jungle for nearly a mile; the same hands and brains would and could fight to drive back anything else impeding their progress.

There came down upon the end of day that strange, misty half-light that makes men of ghosts and ghosts of men. Behind the veil of it, Carter sneaked upon the village. He reached its outskirts and huddled close by a stone wall while he watched the main street. Windows glowed, one by one, in gathering darkness as illumination was switched on. A brighter blaze at the

other end of the street told of a small block of shops and stores.

His first sight of the foe came as a surprise, but not a shock. From the front door of a nearby house stepped a biped structurally no different from the hidden watcher. Two legs, two arms, four fingers and a thumb upon each hand. A bit thinner than the average human, and three or four inches taller, but otherwise the same. A shining window cast light upon his face as he went past and revealed it as also humanlike, with olive complexion.

This individual strolled twenty yards along the street, paused expectantly by a house from which another of his kind soon emerged and joined him. The two then continued toward the block of shops.

GREGORY CARTER edged backward into deeper darkness, sat with his shoulders against the wall, and thought things over. According to other-worlds theories, the chance of Nature duplicating her creations elsewhere in the cosmos was almost nil. On the other hand, a lifeform selecting and exploiting Earthlike conditions must have been born of an Earthlike environment. Similar environments should produce similar results; the evolutionary triumph of any Earthlike planet must be a manlike creature.

Momentarily he wondered whether the two species, Terrestrial and non-Terrestrial, could mate and breed. And, if so, what forms of savagery that might add to a major conflict.

Nothing much was to be learned from his present hiding-place; he was at the wrong end of the hamlet. For a second or two he suffered the irrational desire to take advantage of his own likeness to these others by walking boldly along the main street and seeing what happened. Despite careful training and strict discipline, there are times when the average human is afflicted with a strong what-the-hell feeling, and does something rash by way of thumbing his nose at his troubles.

Carter fought off the temptation, crawled away from the road, got to his feet, and made a wide semi-circle through the fields. The traipse through the jungle had been easier. Night was almost down; he dared not show a light, and he could not tell just where his feet were placing themselves. Twice he stumbled into a ditch and dragged his boots out of mud with loud sucking sounds. Once he plunged headlong over a wire fence twenty inches high.

NO DOGS set up a hulla-baloo, but at one point something caged in a garden

sensed his passing, agitatedly flapped winglike appendages, and gave forth a shrill, ear-piercing whistle. At once a back door opened and a dim figure searched around the garden, then returned inside without looking into the field. Carter got off his belly, shoved the cannon back into its holster and cautiously slunk on. The thing whistled again, but no notice was taken.

At this end of the village, luck was with him. Almost opposite the shops stood a half-built house, its front and back gardens full of rock-blocks and building material. Circling farther to get at it, he picked his way in the gloom over bulging sacks, lengths of timber and mounds of rubble, entered the house from the rear.

Climbing new, unpainted stairs, he reached the roofless first floor, around which the wall projected three feet. The place made an ideal observation-post. The blaze of light from the shops illuminated the whole front of the house, but in the wall was a gap for a ventilator not yet fitted. He could lie in comfort on the floorboards and watch through this convenient spy-hole.

Positioning himself at full length, he extracted a folding pair of 10x night-glasses, opened them, hooked them up like spectacles. He gazed through the hole and got a

close-up view of the other side of the road.

THE FIRST scene that swung into his field was that of the window-display in the facing shop. Goods were arranged tidily enough, but their preparation was crude. Meat cut into small joints, whole vegetables devoid of wrapping, hung or stood in neat array. What little was packaged was in cardboard cartons; nothing was quick-frozen or canned.

That confirmed Carter's first impression that this was a colonial world of fairly recent establishment. Here, they were slaving to duplicate the civilization of the parent planet but hadn't got around to it yet. They were short of this, that and the other, but would have them all in due course, including a host of canneries. He did not waste time in absorbing such data, merely noting it as taught, then shifting attention to the two persons standing outside the shop's window.

Bright light hindered as much as it helped. When either of the two looked toward Carter's side of the road, the face was lost in deep shadow. Or when either looked into the revealing blaze of the shop, the back of his head was toward the watcher. Carter could make useful study of them only in profile. Since the two were facing each other,

side-on to the window, they held this position most of the time.

They fascinated him and at the same time filled him with great uneasiness. Both were middle-aged, tall, slender, and had features marked with the tough self-reliance of pioneers. The worry thing about them was their strange manner toward each other.

THE ONE on the right frowned, pursed his lips, and looked contemplative while his companion wore an earnest expression and made several minor gestures. After a while, the latter relaxed and let his face become expectant. The one on the right then put on a rapid series of facial expressions emphasised with shrugs, eyebrow-liftings and hand-motions. During the whole of this time, neither individual opened his mouth and uttered a single word.

This performance went on for ten minutes or more. Toward the end of it, each suddenly withdrew attention from the other and turned by common consent toward the shop. Behind the window appeared a third individual, who made faces at them; they made faces back at him. Despite the intervening sheet of glasslike substance, what looked like a minor argument in dumb-show followed. Finally, the newcomer made a gesture of indifference and

returned to the back of the shop.

The two on the sidewalk now grinned at each other and gazed idly up and down the street. Their faces remained blank for a few seconds; then the one on the left registered doubt, confusion, suspicion, and stared straight across the street at the half-built house. Simultaneously his companion scowled and looked the same way.

Some sixth sense sounded the alarm and told Carter that now was the time to get out, and fast. At the same time the two started across the street and broke into a run. They looked as though they knew exactly where they were running and why.

SNATCHING off the night-glasses, Carter let warning instinct take possession of him. Racing across the floor, he mounted the rear wall and saw below the dark mound of the sand-pile he'd noted in the garden. He jumped for it, landed amid a flurry of grit, and recovered. Dodging or hurdling various obstacles encountered on the way in, he bolted into the fields and kept going at top pace.

Meanwhile, the pursuers charged through the house's doorless front, out the back, and there paid for not having recent experience of the area behind. The one in the lead tripped over an unseen rock-block, plunged face-first into

a small stack of timber, brought it down with a loud clatter and knocked himself silly. His companion slowed, felt for obstacles with his feet, and hauled the other upright. That misfortune gave the fugitive an extra hundred yards' gain.

Carter made the most of it; a large part of spy training was devoted to the long-distance sprint. And there were rigid rules concerning flight; they must be obeyed, or else.

Firstly, given the choice, one must flee rather than stand and fight, because the prime essential is to get valuable information back to base. Secondly, once on the run, one must go as fast and far as physically possible because the sole object of flight is to shake off pursuit and avoid capture. Thirdly, one must not lose pace or time by looking backward, because nothing thus perceived could speed up escape if one was already going one's fastest. Lastly, if comparative safety lay in one particular direction—as did the jungle right now—one must scoot in any other direction, because a thwarted foe's first move is to make a trap of a sanctuary.

SO CARTER'S legs went twenty to the dozen while he fled through the dark, and gradually altered course to take him toward the town, the last direction in which they'd expect him to go. Far behind,

the faint sounds of running feet had ceased.

As he raced along, he nursed the queer idea that at the precise moment when those two had glimpsed his escaping figure fading down the garden, and into the fields, the entire village had come to active life and started after him, too late. Also that this community spirit had saved him by bollixing up the chase.

Why he should have such a notion was a mystery, but it lurked in his mind and persisted. There had been no hearable evidence of a mob coming after him. Except for the steady pounding of his own feet, and the first onrush of the voiceless two, the brief chase had been conducted in silence that was eerie. There was no shout, nor a curse even when one of the hunters dived onto his face.

Instinctively, Carter felt that the enemy had been baffled by sheer weight of numbers as the village erupted into the moonless night. When a two-man posse is successfully following a fugitive's sounds of flight, being joined by a shouting, swearing crowd drowns out the sonic trail. In some way, that was what had happened; those two might still be out to make a meal of him had not too many cooks appeared to spoil the broth.

Dismissing speculation, Carter maintained a pace

that many would have found killing. Several times he fell, dirtying his uniform but suffering no injury. At one point, he entered a smoothly metalled road and went along it for several miles. Ten times, he had to jump into concealment when glaring headlamps announced the approach of fast, powerful vehicles.

TWICE HE detoured warily around small clusters of houses. Both times, unseen things whistled in gloom-wrapped gardens, windows sprang to light, doors opened, and figures looked out or made brief inspection, but no voice called a challenge.

He stopped and rested behind a roadside thicket when he'd covered such a distance so rapidly that any dogged tracker who caught up with him would be incapable of more than flopping down and gasping for breath. As an individual, Carter's stamina was formidable and was one of the reasons why he'd been chosen for this mission.

By now, the sky-glow of the town was visible from one side, the first faint halo of coming dawn upon the other side. He spent the rest-period mulling over what he had learned, then by analysis deriving his reasons for suspecting that in the village a sudden outrush of would-be hunters had messed-up the hunt.

It all boiled down to the antics of those two characters in front of the shop. Unless by remote chance it was the current gag to put on impromptu miming acts, those two had been communicating with each other. They'd been chatting, been chewing the fat, without speaking.

What's more, the third one in the shop had joined the discussion without bothering to come outside, and also without uttering a word. And when the argument was over, their minds no longer concentrating on the subject in hand, the two had become aware of another mind unlike their own. They had known at once where it was located; with one accord they'd made for the hiding-place, intending a quick grab.

ALL THAT evidence added up to one unavoidable conclusion: these people were telepathic. They'd discarded the faculty of speech—if ever they'd had it in the first place—in favor of more efficient contact. They could pick up the radiations of a non-telepathic mind, even though it lacked the ability to communicate with them. They could determine its distance and direction. Perhaps they could follow it to the crack of doom, providing that a nearby group of other minds did not litter the ether with calls and questions.

A species that was tele-

pathic, as well as ambitious and technologically advanced, could be a foe of fearsome caliber. At the time Gregory Carter had left his base, telepaths had not been unknown on Earth. A few hundred accomplished ones existed, all in positions of influence or authority. Among the masses, there'd been a few thousand lesser adepts who had the rudimentary beginnings of the power; they could communicate erratically, without full control. Scientists claimed that the psionic factor was growing at steadily increasing rate, that a time would come when every living Terrestrial would have abandoned vocal speech.

THESE THOUGHTS led to the further conclusion that the similar products of a similar environment were following an almost identical evolutionary path. That, in turn, posed the number one question: were these people ahead or behind, and by what margin?

If the pair already observed happened to be members of a tiny minority, then the whole species might be lagging behind, or at most approximately level with Earth's kind. But if telepathy were commonplace, if everybody had the power, then they were dangerously ahead. In the latter event, it could be presumed that their plans for space conquest were more de-

veloped, their vessels more advanced in design.

Carter now found himself in the quandary that has bedevilled many an espionage agent throughout history. Is the information already gathered sufficiently weighty to be rushed back at all costs, even at the expense of details that could win a war? Or should one stay put and seek further data, even at the risk of capture and depriving base of the lot? Which is the lesser of two evils: to give warning without adequate information, or to try get that information at possible cost to the warning?

IT SEEMED to him that at least one item of news was essential. He must report whether this species was advanced or retarded, with respect to the hordes of Earth. It could be gotten with enough accuracy for Earth's strategic purposes if he based it on details about two subjects only.

For one, he must gain the measure of their telepathic power. How many possessed it—all, or many, or a few? What was its strength? Could they communicate or overhear at no more than fifty yards distance, or five hundred, or within the limits of the horizon?

For the other, he must get a close enough look at their ships to make reasonable snap-judgment as to whether they

were equal, inferior or superior to Earth's.

Out there in free space, a monster vessel twice had placed itself in close juxtaposition with Carter's own ship, making him seek frantic refuge in hyperspatial darkness, and pile up the centuries before his return. The glimpses he had caught had told him nothing, except that the thing was huge. He did not know whether it was a creation of this telepathic mankind, or of some other more alien life form not yet encountered. He'd have bet a thousand to one on the thing belonging to the local life form. But bets and guesses weren't enough; Earth wanted facts.

BY THIS time he had recovered breath and strength. No pursuers appeared, having traced him through the ether. A couple of vehicles had rocked along the road without their occupants showing awareness of another-world thinker behind the thicket. That meant nothing. Telepathically, one cannot overhear one thing while concentrating one's mind on something else. Those in the vehicles probably had been busy with thoughts of their own. It takes a momentarily unoccupied mind to pick up impulses not intended for it.

Even if every living soul upon this world enjoyed mental sensitivity, Carter's own

position was not hopeless. Most intelligent brains are occupied with something or other most of the time. He could be detected telepathically only by a brain temporarily lacking an absorbing subject.

And, as recent experience had shown, to be detected is not necessarily to be trapped. The overhearer had only to let go an involuntary cry of alarm, or an excited yelp, and at once the fugitive's mental impulses vanished in a flood of responding radiations. Once discovered, the trail became obliterated by too many eager trackers.

Sometimes there is safety in numbers—for the other fellow.

CARTER moved onward, furtively sneaking through the pale light of growing dawn. By the time the rim of the sun peeped up, he'd reached a two-acre block of trees one mile from the town. The area around the wood appeared to be—reserved for a public park.

Getting right to the middle of the trees, where undergrowth was thick and no well-trod path came near, he bedded down in a hollow between raised roots, set his wrist-alarm to operate shortly before the fall of night, closed his eyes and fell into long overdue sleep.

At high noon he awoke, lay for a while basking in warmth, and listened for evi-

dence of nearby life. The noise of the town, alive and active, came to him clearly. But no voices around the wood. No yells and screams of children playing on the soft sward of adjacent meadows. Maybe mothers were sitting out there gossiping while kids romped, around and bawled their heads off—but how can one hear the soundless?

Dragging a pack from a pocket, he broke it open, ate a full day's iron rations, drank its water and threw away the plastic phial. Concentrated nourishment lay in his belly and made him drowsy. Bedding down again, he resumed his slumber, his last conscious thought being concerned with the possibility of his mind radiating in its dreams, betraying him, and resulting in his waking up a prisoner.

IF ANYONE did come near, they failed to sense his presence. The wrist alarm sent thin tingling shocks up Carter's left arm; he jerked, yawned, stretched, and clambered to his feet. Light remained strong but the sun was almost down and the pall of dusk was creeping up from the opposite horizon.

Eyes and ears alert, he slunk between the trees to where the grass began and looked toward the town. Halfway between him and his objective three soarers floated along in line abreast. They were about two hundred feet

up, tilted forward at a twenty degree angle and moving at moderate pace. Below them the grass swirled under pressure of their air-columns.

He made himself a darker shadow within a tree-shadow and watched the soarers until they had gone from sight, in the direction of the jungle. Perhaps they were searching for him, raking the world for one alien mind heard but not seen. Or perhaps they were seeking his ship.

Still, the episode had given him two more items of information. That's all a spy wants and absorbs avidly—information—as the hart panteth after the waterbrook.

They used individual soarers. Not very important but worth knowing. The second item was better. He had directed a strong, concentrated thought toward the pilot of the nearest soarer, then about twelve hundred yards away. *"Come and get me!"*

There was no response, no directional stare, no swerve, and sudden pursuit. True, the fellow's attention was on his piloting; but if he was engaged in a systematic search, he should also have been listening-out. It seemed a fairly safe bet that they weren't receptive at twelve hundred yards, or else not all of them were telepathic.

Before he started homeward, he'd have to put this matter to the test even if it brought a hundred of them

hot upon his heels. Meanwhile there was this town to be circled, in the hope of finding a landing-ground complete with a sitting ship. He slipped away from the safety of the trees and headed on a southward curve, his spirit wary and on edge, his eyes trying to look all ways at once.

THE FIRST narrow squeak occurred when he slipped through a bushy dell and found there a couple sitting on a boulder with their arms around each other's waists. Forcing his mind to think only of the softness of the grass, the lightness of the air, and the calmness of the night, he kept going with studied nonchalance, his right hand hung down to conceal the gun. Passing within a hundred yards of them, he continued onward, his ears perked, a coldness in his back hairs. It goes much against the grain to shoot young lovers.

The two remained seated, watching him. He maintained his trivial stream of thought for half a mile, not knowing whether this attempted deception was necessary but doing his best to play safe. Maybe they could not overhear his mind. On the other hand, if they were receptive it did not follow that they'd been fooled. The male would be naturally reluctant to leave the female while he chased after a wanted and possibly

dangerous alien. Right now, the pair might have solved their problem by hastening to town to sound the alarm.

HE SPEEDED up as he visualised the resultant pursuit and that was nearly his undoing. Before he knew it, he'd started across a road on which was a fast-moving car. The machine made a wild swerve as he leaped for the opposite verge. He felt the wind of it as it shot past, saw the driver's reproving glare.

Five seconds later the driver's expression changed to one of suspicion as he realized that he had bellowed mental abuse at somebody telepathically deaf and dumb. At a widening of the road a mile farther on the car swept round in a tight circle and came racing back. It reached the critical spot too late; by now the fugitive was beyond detectable reach and out of sight. The driver gazed futilely up and down the road, over the landscape, then shrugged, entered the car, resumed his journey.

Carter got halfway round the town and reached the southward side without further mishap. Three miles from the scattered suburbs he picked up essential datum number one: the ship which had scared him in space really did belong to the local life-form.

Now darkness was deep, with a sprinkling of stars and

no moon. But there, brilliantly lit by surrounding floodlights, was a great concrete raft bearing four huge landing-rings in one of which sat a sphere.

IN GENERAL appearance it was much like Carter's own vessel. It was at least eighty times the size, possibly a hundred times. To estimate dimensions was difficult; the smooth, globular shape was deceptive and he was studying it through nightglasses from a distance exceeding twelve hundred yards, the safety-range. He had to lie prone in the gloom, and make guesses based on the relative size of small, shadowy figures moving around the landing-ring. One thing seemed certain: that great creation could swallow his own ship through its tremendous air-lock door.

Sooner or later, the monster must take off; it could not squat there forever and be of any use. Activity around it in the night hours suggested that departure time was not far off. Wriggling a little nearer, to gain the concealment of low bushes, he decided to keep watch until the thing took to the skies. He could not see any venturi tubes, or any anti-gravity plates. A boring vigil would be a cheap price to pay for data on its method of propulsion.

Two hours before dawn,

when his red-rimmed eyes still were straining through the dark, the ship went wherever it was going. The manner of its departure brought him to his feet, his expression incredulous. It did not bang off, or boom off, or roar away; it did not float majestically upward and diminish among the stars; it did not behave like his own vessel, shivering into a pale ghost of itself and swiftly fading from sight.

A siren wailed on the roof of low buildings beyond the concrete raft. Many tiny figures hastened away from the occupied landing-ring and became lost in outer shadows. There was a minute of absolute silence, a hush as of an unseen audience waiting, waiting. Then the ship was gone.

ONE INSTANT it was there, metallic and massive, gleaming under the floodlights; the next instant it was not there. It flashed cleanly and completely out of existence far more quickly than the naked eye could register its going. There followed a violent thunderclap as the resulting vacuum imploded.

This, thought Carter grimly, was more than enough to make Earth review its plans and change direction of expansion or prepare for war on unprecedented scale. When he'd left, Earth had possessed emigrant transport ships

thirty times the size of his scout vessel, but none eighty to a hundred times larger. They could vanish so swiftly that it was eerie, but not so fast that the process couldn't be seen at all.

Moreover, it looked very much as though these alien vessels had some method of checking on the material cosmos even while right outside of it. A major problem that had defied Terrestrial technology had been solved by others. Well, it was some small comfort to know that the problem was not unbeatable, that a solution really did exist.

The ship that had ambushed him twice in space had not come upon him by sheer accident. It had positioned itself deliberately, reaching out magnetic arms to grasp him, even as he reacted fast and slipped away. Possibly it was a guard-vessel and one of a fleet of patrolling watchers; sentinels of the skies on the everlasting lookout for alien invaders. If so, that ship could leap out of concealing hyperspace with a positional accuracy impossible to any Earth-ship.

HE NOW FELT that it had become triply important to escape entrapment and get back home with his warning. There were a thousand other things Earth would want to know about a potential enemy. Where was

the parent-world located? When had they started spreading through the cosmos, how far had they gone, how fast was their rate of expansion? What was their total strength in people and ships? Were any other life-forms in subjection to them, their nature, their habitats, their ripeness for rebellion.

All that could come later. It would have to come later. Ten, a hundred, a thousand scout-ships could be sent out to dig up the data. Once Carter got back home, Earth would have actual knowledge of the existence of rivals while the foe would have only vague suspicion. Earth would know approximately *where* to find the enemy, whereas the enemy would have no idea where to find Earth.

Yes, all that remained was to make a revealing test of telepathic power and skip fast across a great arm of stars.

VI

HE HEADED northward at once, jungleward, taking advantage of remaining night. Daylight added considerably to dangers. It was best to travel while other eyes were handicapped, other minds asleep. Every step took him a yard nearer his ship, a fraction nearer to complete escape.

Then Gregory Carter received a mental jolt at the thought that he might be

planetbound for keeps, and running around like a rat in a box, because the ship had been discovered and put out of action. He paused long enough to extract and consult his sympath. It still gave a reading in the proper direction; he perspired with relief.

The chosen route lay around the side of the town opposite to that taken on his southward journey. The choice meant sacrificing knowledge of ground already gone over, but it was worth it. Other scenes might teach him other things of value. Besides, if any aroused minds were still trying to track him southward he ran less risk of encountering them on his return. The wily fox does not double back straight into the pursuing pack.

Soon after dawn, progress had become decidedly tricky. He was compelled to sneak like a fugitive felon alongside hedges, through ditches, copses and woods, without coming within reach of a mind probing idly around or arousing the curiosity of eyes observing him from a distance. Twice he sat in concealment and battled with the question of whether to keep going under the too-revealing sun or to bed down someplace safe and wait for the night. Each time a feeling of urgency impelled him to continue, sun or no sun, until such time as circumstances made it folly.

IT WAS A piece of luck, he decided, that he'd picked on a frontier planet in the first place. Sparse settlement had given him room to move around. On the parent-world, probably overcrowded with inquisitive minds, he would not have remained free for five minutes. They'd have collared him and with no effort whatsoever they'd have picked his brain for every datum it held.

Steering more than twelve hundred yards clear of an isolated farm, around which several figures were moving, Carter ran, half-bent, across a rutted road, climbed a hill crowded with trees, let the sympath's needle show him the right way through the forest on the other side. Two-thirds of the way down the slope he found another road, and beyond it a large village lying in the valley.

At once, his attention became fixed on the building nearest, about three-quarters of a mile away. It was a school, complete with playground, on which a couple of hundred children were chasing each other.

This was as good a set-up as any he was likely to find; there was enough cover for a cautious approach. Behind him, was more in which to get lost. Two-hundred test subjects were ready to hand, none of them formidable enough to give him a moment's concern.

Slipping from tree to tree, bush to bush, he placed himself at distance beyond detection by anyone using the road. That was imperative. He couldn't keep watch for eavesdroppers to his rear while making a check of the same ability to his front. No walkers on the road were going to creep up and nab him, while he was busily concentrating in the opposite direction.

HE REACHED a strategic spot about twelve hundred yards from the playground, watched the milling moppets awhile and did not like what he saw. They jumped around with the same uninhibited energy as any bunch of Earth-children, but there was no accompaniment of shrill pandemonium. They ran and hopped and danced and mauled each other in utter silence. Or if they were making a hellish din it was hearable only to minds, not to ears.

For a bit longer he studied them individually, looking for at least one vocal talker. He looked in vain. There was no escaping the implication: if any random choice of two-hundred were unanimously telepathic then the entire species was telepathic.

Giving them his full attention in effort to determine what proportion responded and how swiftly, he did his best to project a strong mental call. "*I am a fugitive! Can*

you hear me? I am a fugitive!"

No response. He edged fifty yards nearer, called again. Nothing doing. Perhaps they were too intent on their playing to pick up a strange call. But no, a dozen of them were sitting on a wall top, swinging their legs and seemingly without a thought in the world.

"I am a fugitive. The authorities want me. Can you hear? Can you hear?"

Another edging forward, and yet another. At a little under one thousand yards he was heard. About forty of them stared simultaneously in his direction, unable to see him but obviously certain that he was there. A split second later all the rest looked the same way, their minds responding to those of the forty. Two hundred pairs of young eyes seeking the hidden. As a demonstration of how to point out the source of a mental message it was mighty impressive.

CARTER BACKED away fast, his own brain reiteating the final item of essential information. *All of them. All of them—at nearly a thousand yards.* He was watching them even as he retreated, half expecting them to rush his way like one excited mob.

They did not bother. Standing in silence they gazed his way with one accord. It did not occur to him that two-

hundred minds sounding an alarm would be no less effective than two-hundred childish voices unitedly screaming, "*Fire!*"

Cutting across the valley, he started up the next slope, looked backward at the village. The kids were still there, still gazing toward his last hiding-place. But now a battalion of hefty adults were sprinting for the same spot. Some bore weapons resembling high-velocity rifles.

On the road previously crossed, a large truck and two cars had stopped, unloaded a dozen pursuers who were already after him and pointing in his direction. From that angle they'd had no need to seek him mentally, they'd seen him. The hunt was on. If any more proof were needed, the big gang from the village changed course in obedience to the pointings of the dozen.

HE BOLTED uphill like a frightened hare, got deep among the trees and thanked the fates for their cover. His legs started pounding at a fast, regular pace that would wear down all but the most exceptional pursuer. No sense now in weaving around or doubling back to defeat the chase. No use playing hide and seek among the trees when the seekers can see through every obstacle within a thousand yards. The only effective tactic was to head for the ship, meanwhile main-

taining a lead that would keep him out of mental reach. So long as he kept one jump beyond grasp of listening minds, so long must they fumble and lose time by following his visible tracks.

Down the hill, across another valley, this one devoid of habitation. Up the wooded side of the next hill. At a suitable viewing gap on the crest he paused long enough to consult the sympath and watch for the hunt. When the first of them burst from the opposite trees he got going again, good and fast, knowing that he had gained most of a mile.

Carter kept up the killing pace for two hours, resisting the temptation to make easier detours through valleys, taking hills and dales alike as he followed the sympath's pointing needle. The last descent through thick woods brought him to a wide, flat area on which stood a small town, and beyond it the jungle.

The landscape offered poor cover. A crossing would be much less risky by night. He could find a hole amid the trees, crawl into it and remain until darkness fell. But if any of the posse nosed around within a thousand yards, the first he'd know of it would be when a gun was poked down the hole.

Indecision cost no more than a few seconds. Determined to push on, he surveyed the flat area, seeking a route

that took maximum advantage of the little cover available. Four soarers appeared over the rim of the distant jungle, rapidly swept toward the town, and landed in an untilled field on the nearer side.

THERE WAS no way of telling whether these arrivals were ordinary travelers, aerial searchers, or part of a jungle-watching patrol. Assembled reports must have told the enemy that he could have come only out of this particular tangle of vegetation and not from any other. They lacked the manpower to place a close cordon around it, but had the facilities to keep the big area under constant observation. Possibly other soarers were maintaining guard, having relieved the ones just landed.

While Carter looked on, the four pilots dismounted, strolled across the landing-field and into the town. He licked his lips as he eyed the abandoned machines. The natural instinct of the well-trained spy is to exploit any moment of carelessness. To do so is to take chances; sometimes it comes off, other times it doesn't work out so well.

He made quick appraisal of the odds against him. To get there, he'd have to cross a mile of flat, in broad daylight, with no cover, no way of telling how many curious eyes were watching from win-

dows at the edge of the town. If he reached the machines and got aboard one of them, he might find its alien controls strange enough to cause fatal delay. Further, all four might be low in whatever they used for fuel. If he took one up in a hurry, without checking, he could get a mile away and a thousand feet high, then plunge to ground when power failed.

There were weighty counter-considerations. Somewhere behind, a small army of trackers was slowly but surely catching up. He was their meat if he stayed put long enough. To reach sanctuary the flatland had to be crossed, the chance of being pounced upon had to be accepted. He found his legs taking him toward the parked soarers even before he'd finally decided to grab one.

VII

IF ANY SNOOPERS at suburban windows saw him making for the machines they thought nothing of it. Probably they were deceived by the casual way in which he ambled the last four hundred yards and behaved as though he had every right to be there.

Still displaying what authority he could muster, for the benefit of nearby onlookers, Gregory Carter stepped aboard a soarer, looked it over. It was not identical with

Earth models. A peculiar ring of wire mesh projected from its top rim and it had no visible engine. The controls consisted of a small lever and two studs, one red, one white.

Maybe the thing utilised broadcast power radiated from somewhere in the area. If so, that put them another step ahead of Earth which had solved the problem of how to do it, but not that of how to do it economically.

Firming his lips, he pressed the red stud; nothing happened. He shot a glance along his back trail and saw twenty of the enemy emerge from the woods. They spotted him at the same moment and started running. On his other side, two more were racing out of town and heading for him at top pace. Whipping out his big gun, Carter put it on the control-board in readiness to shoot it out if necessary.

HE RAMMED the white stud. The twin fans shifted, hesitated, circled, built up a low whine. The soarer trembled but remained on the ground. That left nothing but the lever. The twenty pursuers from the woods were still nearly a mile away. The two from the town were six hundred yards distant and galloping like racehorses.

He moved the lever one notch. The whine hit a higher note, the fans sped faster, the whole machine jittered.

Two notches. The soarer lifted with lazy reluctance and wobbled upward. Two more notches. The machine steadied and ascended rapidly. His heart full of glee, he looked over the side, saw the two runners from the town standing with legs apart and gaping up at him open-mouthed.

The grin with which he favored them left his face as they recovered and dashed for the other soarers. Too late he realised that he should have sabotaged the three by sending them skyward unpiloted. No use deploring the oversight; even if he had thought of it he might not have had time to do it.

The lever shifted five notches and the air-column boosted pressure. Tilting the contraption forward, he shot toward the jungle.

By the time the other two had left the ground he was five miles ahead and zooming along at maximum tilt. At the jungle's verge his lead was maintained, but not increased. Dropping the soarer low enough to skim the tree-tops, and thus making observation more difficult for the pursuit, he raced along the line indicated by the sympath's needle.

FOURTEEN miles brought him to the hidden ship. At that point, the other two soarers were at the same distance in the south but coming up fast. Another one had ap-

peared high in the north. A flotilla of ten was speeding in from the east.

They weren't giving him much time to find a suitable gap below, sink to ground, dismount, run through the jungle and get into the ship. It would be touch and go, unless somehow he could make more time.

That problem was solved by simple process of becoming desperate and acting accordingly. He dropped the soarer until it hung four feet above the camouflaging mass of leaves and branches. Then he tilted it, jerked its lever to the last notch and jumped out. He fell into the holding-net while the deserted machine soared westward.

It was senseless to wait and see whether the aerial hunt had risen to the bait. Either they were chasing the soarer or they weren't. Frantically scrambling under the net, Carter slid over the ship's top bulge, tumbled headlong into thick undergrowth. The gun he'd grabbed as he'd jumped fell out of his hand and he wasted no time in looking for it.

As he lugged open the ship's door it struck him inconsequentially that not once had he used the gun or the tiny camera. And not once had anyone fired a shot at him. The entire episode had been one of pursuit and evasion, without bloodshed or battle. If those facts had any signifi-

cance, he decided, they proved that success can be gained without pain.

Retracting the splay-rods, Carter left the net suspended between trees. At the controlboard he switched in the pre-set return coordinates. A vast silence fell and supreme blackness lay all around. The dark of nothingness. That was escape, complete, unpreventable escape. No matter what they'd got, no matter what they did, they could not stop him now.

The waiting time in hyperspatial obscurity would be long because he had a long, long way to go. When light flamed through the ports again he would not be on Earth. The pre-set switching devices weren't all that accurate. But he'd find himself in a known, familiar starfield with Sol easily identifiable.

A few dexterous hops into and out of the dark would take him the rest of the way. He'd play the man in the new moon before the last switching, then step onto the green fields of home.

HIS ARRIVAL created no great excitement. The scoutship appeared like a hazy phantom and quickly solidified at the edge of a plantation that once had been a spaceport. Of the port there was no sign at all. Probably it had been rebuilt elsewhere, on bigger and better scale. An absolute mini-

mum of four thousand years is a whacking big slice of time.

The town still stood exactly where it had been before. A different town, smaller, neater, of unfamiliar architecture; that, too, was to be expected. They'd warned him of all this when he'd left, telling him that when he returned he might not be able to understand the speech, conform to the customs, make sense of the culture. He'd be too ignorant to feel his way along an alley, if there were any alleys.

AS ORDERED in the far past, Gregory Carter did not befuddle himself by leaving the ship and seeking authority in a place become almost alien. He opened the door, sat on the bottom step of the ladder and waited for the powers that be to come and fetch him. In that town was somebody appointed to take care of the unadapted, and put him in contact with those currently in command of Terrestrial strategy.

While he waited, several people passed along a nearby road, paused to look at him and the ship, moved quietly on. It was half an hour before the spread of news brought results. A huge car slid along the road, stopped by the path to the plantation. Two burly men in dark green uniforms got out, walked up

the path, halted before the ship.

Feeling that the information should be trumpeted rather than spoken, he said to them, "I'm Gregory Carter. Ship number X4B. My details are on file in the Space Records Office, wherever that's located these days."

They heard him with no especial interest and less surprise. One of them pointed invitingly toward the road. Carter sighed, locked the ship's door and went with them. The car moved off with high acceleration and no engine noise whatever. The escort sat blank-faced and silent.

"Oh, well," muttered Carter with resignation. "Reckon I'll have to learn the language all over again. Velly solly, no spik."

He glanced through the window at a row of small, attractive shops, noticed that above each one was a sign consisting of a single line with a few wiggles. No lettering; nothing resembling anything out of the oldtime alphabet. A highly refined form of shorthand, perhaps.

THEY ARRIVED at what might be a police station, a military recruiting depot, a tax office or any other haunt of officialdom. Several more green uniformed men were therein. None offered him better than a casual glance. Conducting him to a small

room, the escort signed to a chair and left him to his thoughts.

A few minutes later one of them returned, went through the performance of rubbing his midriff and pretending to drink, finished with a questioning look. Gregory Carter shook his head. The other went away. Hell of a thing, thought Carter. The day of established space-going, with Armageddon preparing at the root of the nebular arm, and people were communicating by primitive signs like so many aborigines.

His escort reappeared, led him along a corridor and into a metal walled room resembling a very small elevator-box. It would hold only two. One guard stepped in with him while the other stayed outside and closed the sliding door. The inside guard adjusted a dial on the wall and pressed a stud.

Ready for a rapid rise or fall, Carter was taken by surprise when the room made no motion in the vertical plane. Nothing happened except that from outside came the muffled sound of a hard crack like that of a distant shot. The guard opened the door. His fellow was no longer there and they were standing in a bigger corridor.

THEY WENT to an office where two men stared at them, thought in silence, waved them away. Two more in another office did the

same. Within an hour they'd visited twenty offices and not a soul had offered them so much as a grunt.

Back to the metal room. More dialling, more stud-pressing and again the bang of a faraway gun. This time they entered a large hall, mounted an escalator at one end, rode upstairs. A glimpse through a wide window gave Carter a view of a large, unrecognizable city outside. Tall, slender towers, aerial bridges, a moving roadway, something black and streamlined bulleting through the sky.

Given a seat in a corridor, he was left there long enough for his mind to go whirly with speculation. He was still on Earth, no doubt of that, but how he had been transferred from town to city passed his understanding.

The guard came back, took him to a long, narrow room. In it was a big stretch of table behind which sat seven men. The one in the middle, an elderly character with a wisp of white beard on his chin, carefully considered the visitor, then spoke.

He said, "Sit down."

Taking a chair, Carter looked at the other's incongruously youthful eyes and remarked, "Thank heavens I can talk to somebody at last."

"**T**HAT IS exactly why I am here," responded the other. "I am Sedom, a speaker of archaic languages. I am

fluent with a dozen of them." He gave a faint, deprecating smile. "There aren't many of us—it is an eccentric form of scholarship."

His six fellows then smiled, doing it with an air of tolerance. They seemed content to listen, leaving the handling to Sedom. The guard remained by the door, impassive and bored.

"Tell me your story," Sedom invited.

Carter told it swiftly, with a wealth of detail. The others listened without interruption, matching expressions from time to time.

"Now you know what you're up against," Carter concluded. "I would not attempt to forecast when or where contact may take place, or whether it will result in collision and war. However, there is one thing we should do in the interim."

"What is that?"

"We should locate the parent planet."

"Why?"

"It's the throbbing heart of the entire species. One blow at it would be more effective than twenty aimed at frontier worlds. If dragged into war, we should immediately clobber the parent world good and hard. That means we've got to learn where it is. I am willing to volunteer for further search. I'd have made search while there but for the more urgent need of getting back with what I'd got."

"I see your predicament," Sedom admitted.

Carter pressed on. "What's more, I should now have a better chance of success. After all these years you should be able to give me a scout-vessel that is really something. Not that I complain about the old one. For its day and age, it was topnotch; but ships considerably superior can be built. I have seen them for myself."

LEANING back in his chair, Sedom brooded a short while, then echoed, "After all these years. Do you know how many you have used?"

"No, sir. The minimum time required for my trip was four thousand. I know I've exceeded it but don't know by how much."

"Our records go back six thousand," Sedom informed. "They contain no mention of you. That does not surprise us; we know that three or four stabs into deep space were made at earlier dates. Evidently yours was one of them. Therefore you have been done at least six thousand years, and no man can say how much longer."

"Then the greater the urgency, the greater the need to prepare for trouble," Carter retorted. "If time marches on for us, it also marches for them. Every century, every decade widens their empire and brings it nearer to ours.

We've got to move fast to get the measure of them. And we've got to find and identify the planet of origin."

"Time marches on for you, too," said Sedom, gently. He made a gesture indicating the six sitting with him. "They see your lips move and hear your mind talking and answer you through my mouth. They lack the faculty of speech which has become superfluous."

Carter shot to his feet. "What? You mean Earth has been conquered even while I was feeling around for the foe?"

"You misunderstand." Sedom waved him down. "I hate to tell you this. You were an early bird; too early—so early that you lost the worm. Later ones got there first, having technical advantages not available to you."

He registered sympathy, went on, "It is impossible to strike at the heart of the opposition, as you suggest. There is no opposition; there is no foe. The ones out there are ours. *This* is the parent world!"

The guard led Gregory Carter away, squeezing his arm by way of speechless comfort. But outside were the stars, still calling, calling.

For eleven years, Brock and I had gone from world to world on our exploration tour. Then Brock had to ask the devastating question

WHY?

by Robert Silverberg

illustrated by EMSH

AND WE LEFT Capella XXII, after a six-month stay, and hopped across the galaxy to Dschubba, in the forehead of the Scorpion. After the eight worlds of Dschubba had been seen and digested and recorded and classified; and after we had programmed all our material for transmission back to Earth; we moved on again, Brock and I.

We zeroed into warp and doublesqueaked into the star Pavo, which from Earth is seen to be the brightest star of the Peacock. Pavo proved to be planetless, save for one ball of mud and methane a billion miles out; we chalked the mission off as unpromising, and moved on once again.

Brock was the coordinator; I, the fine-tooth man. He saw in patterns; I, in particulars. We had been teamed for eleven years. We had visited seventy-eight stars and one hundred sixty-three planets. The end was not quite in sight.

We hung in the grayness of warp, suspended neither in space nor in not-space, hovering in an interstice. Brock said, "I vote for Markab."

"Alpha Pegasi? No. I vote for Etamin."

But Gamma Draconis held little magic for him. He rubbed his angular hands through his tight-cropped hair and said, "The Wheel, then."

I nodded. "The Wheel."



I started to tear away the tenacious plant.

THE WHEEL was our guide: not really a wheel so much as a map of the heavens in three dimensions, a lens of the galaxy, sprinkled brightly with stars. I pulled a switch; a beam of light lanced down from the ship's wall, needle-thin, playing against the Wheel. Brock seized the handle and imparted axial spin to the Wheel. Over and over for three, four, five rotations; then, stop. The light-beam stung Alphecca.

"Alphecca, then," Brock said.

"Yes. Alphecca." I noted it in the log, and began setting up the coordinates on the drive.

Brock was frowning uneasily. "This failure to agree... this inability to decide on a matter so simple as our next destination..."

"Yes. Elucidate. Expound. Exegetise. What pattern do you see in that?"

Scowling, he said, "Disagreement for the sake of disagreement is unhealthy. Conflict is valuable, but not for its own sake. It worries me."

"Perhaps we've been in space too long. Perhaps we should resign our commissions, leave the Exploratory Corps, return to Earth and settle there."

His face drained of blood. "No," he said. "No. No."

WE EMERGED from warp within humming distance of Alphecca, a bright

star orbited by four worlds. Brock was playing calculus at the time; dribblets of sweat glossed his face at each integration. I peered through the thick quartz of the observation panel and counted planets. "Four worlds. One, two, three, and four."

I looked at him. His unfleshy face was tight with pain; after nearly a minute he said, "Pick one."

"Me?"

"Pick one!"

"Alphecca Two."

"All right; we'll land there. I won't contest the point, Hammond. I want to *land* on Alphecca Two." He grinned at me—a bright-eyed wild grin that I found unpleasant. But I saw what he was doing; he was easing a stress-pattern between us, eliminating a source of conflict before the chafing friction ignited trouble. When two men live in a spaceship eleven years, such things are necessary.

Calmly and untensely I took a reading on Alphecca Two. I sighted us in and actuated the computer. This was the way a landing was effected; this was the way Brock and I had effected one hundred sixty-three landings. The ion-drive exploded into life.

We dropped "downward." Alphecca Two rose to meet us as our slim pale-green needle of a ship dove tail-first toward the world below.

THE LANDING was routine. I sketched out a big 164 on my chart, and we donned spacesuits to make our preliminary explorations. Brock paused a moment at the airlock, smoothing the purple cloth of his suit, adjusting his air-intake, tightening his belt-cincture. The corners of his mouth twitched nervously. Within the head-globe he looked frightened, and very tired.

I said, "You're not well. Maybe we should postpone our first look-see."

"Maybe we *should* go back to Earth, Hammond. And live in a beehive and breathe filthy gray soup." His voice was edged with bitter reproach. "Let's go outside." He turned away, face shadowed morosely, and touched the stud that peeled back the airlock hatch.

I followed him into the lock and down the elevator. He was silent, stiff, reserved. I wished I had his talent for glimpsing patterns: this mood of his had probably been a long time building.

But I saw no cause for it. After eleven years, I thought, I should know him almost as well as I do myself. Or better. But no easy answers came, and I followed him out onto the exit stage and dropped gently down.

Landing One Six Four was entering the exploratory stage.

THE GROUND spread out far to the horizon, a dull orange in color, rough in texture, pebbly, thick of consistency. We saw a few trees, bare-trunked, bluish. Green vines swarmed over the ground, twisted and gnarled.

Otherwise, nothing.

"Another uninhabited planet," I said. "That makes one hundred eight out of the hundred sixty-four."

"Don't be premature. You can't judge a world by a few acres. Land at a pole; extrapolate utter barrenness. It's not a valid pattern. Not enough evidence."

I cut him short. "Here's one time when I perceive a pattern. I perceive that this world's uninhabited. It's too damned quiet."

Chuckling, Brock said, "I incline to agree. But remember Adhara XI."

I remembered Adhara XI: the small, sandy world far from its primary, which seemed nothing but endless yellow sand dunes, rolling westward round and round the planet. We had joked about the desert-world, dry and parched, inhabited only by the restless dunes. But after the report was written, after our data was codified and flung through subspace toward Earth, we found the oasis on the eastern continent—a tiny garden of green things and sweet air, so sharply unlike the rest of Adhara XI. I remembered sleek,

scaly creatures slithering through the crystal lake, and an indolent old worm sleeping beneath a heavy-fruited tree.

"Adhara XI is probably swarming with Earth tourists," I said, "now that our amended report is public knowledge. I often think we should have concealed the oasis from Earth, and returned there ourselves when we grew tired of exploring the galaxy."

BROCK'S head snapped up sharply. He ripped a sprouting tip from a leathery vine and said, "When we grow tired? Hammond, aren't you tired already? Eleven years, a hundred sixty-four worlds?"

Now I saw the pattern taking fairly clear shape. I shook my head, throttling the conversation. "Let's get down the data, Brock. We can talk later."

We proceeded with the measurements of our particular sector of Alphecca II. We nailed down the dry vital statistics, bracketing them off so that Earth could enter the neat figures in its giant catalog of explored worlds.

GRAVITY—1.02 E.

ATMOSPHERIC CONSTITUTIONS—ammonia/carbon dioxide Type ab7, unbreathable

ESTIMATED PLANETARY DIAMETER—.87

E. INTELLIGENT LIFE

—NONE

We filled out the standard forms, ran the standard tests, took the standard soil samples. Exploration had become a smooth mechanical routine.

Our first tour took three hours. We wandered over the slowly rising hills, with the spaceship always at our backs, and Alphecca high behind us. The dry soil crunched unpleasantly beneath our heavy boots.

CONVERSATION was at a minimum. Brock and I rarely spoke when it was not absolutely necessary—and when we did speak, it was to let a tight, tense remark escape confinement, not to communicate anything. We shared too many silent memories. Eleven years and one hundred sixty-four planets. All Brock had to do was say "*Fomalhaut*," or I "*Theta Eridani*," and a train of associations and memories was set off in whose depths we could browse silently for hours and hours.

Alphecca II did not promise to be as memorable as those worlds. There would be nothing here to match the fantastic moonrise of Fomalhaut VI, the five hundred mirror-bright moons in stately procession through the sky, each glinting in a different hue. That moonrise had overwhelmed us four years ago, and remained yet bright. Alphecca II, dead world that it was—or rather world not

yet alive—would leave no marks on our memories.

But bitterness was rising in Brock. I saw the pattern rising; I saw the question bubbling up through the layers of his mind, ready to be asked.

And on the fourth day, he let it be asked. After four days on Alphecca II, four days of staring at the grotesque twisted green shapes of the angular sprawling vines, four days of watching the lethargic fission of the pond protozoa who seemed to be the world's only animal life, Brock suddenly looked up at me.

He asked the shattering question that should never be asked.

"Why?"

ELEVEN years and a hundred sixty-four worlds earlier, the seeds of that unanswered question had been sown. I was fresh out of the Academy, twenty-three, a tall, sharp-nosed boy with what some said was an irritatingly precise way of looking at things.

I should say that I bitterly resented being told I was coldly precise. People accused me of Teutonic heaviness; a girl I once had known said that to me, after a notably unsuccessful affair had come trailing to a halt. I recall turning to her, glaring at the light dusting of freckles across her nose, and telling her, "I have no Teutonic

blood whatsoever. If you'll take the trouble to think of the probable Scandinavian derivation of my name..."

She slapped me.

Shortly after that, I met Brock—Brock, who at twenty-four was already the Brock I would know at thirty-five, harsh of face and voice, dark of complexion, with an expression of nervous wariness registering in his blue-black eyes always and ever. Brock never accused me of Teutonicism; he laughed when I cited some minor detail from memory, but the laugh was one of respect.

We were both Academy graduates, both restless. It showed in Brock's face, and I don't doubt it showed in mine. Earth was small and dirty and crowded, and each night the stars (those bright enough to glint through the haze and brightness of the cities) seemed to mock at us.

BROCK AND I gravitated together. We shared a room in Appalachia North; we shared a library planchet; we shared reading-tapes and music-disks, and occasionally sweethearts. And eight weeks after my twenty-third birthday, seven weeks before Brock's twenty-fourth, we hailed a cab and invested our last four coins in a trip downtown to the Administration of External Exploration.

There, we spoke to a bland-faced, smiling man with one leg prosthetic (he boasted of

it) and his left hand a waxy synthetic one. "I got that way on Sirius VI," he told us. "But I'm an exception. Most of the exploration teams keep going for years and years, and nothing ever happens to them. McKees and Haugmuth have been out twenty-six years now; that's the record. We hear from them, every few months or so. They keep on going, further and further out."

Brock nodded. "Good. Give us the forms." He signed first; I added my name below, finishing with a flourish. I stacked the triplicate forms neatly together and shoved them back at the half-synthetic recruiter.

"Excellent. Excellent. Welcome to the Corps."

He shook our hands, giving the hairy-knuckled right hand to Brock, the waxy left to me. I gripped it tightly, wondering if he could feel my grip.

Three days later, we were in space, bound outward. In all the time since the original idea had sprung up unvoiced between us, neither Brock nor myself had paused to ask the damnable question.

Why?

We had joined the Corps; we had renounced Earth. Motive, unstated, or unknown. We let the matter lie dormant between us for eleven years, through a procession of strange, and then less strange worlds.

Until Brock's agony broke forth to the surface. He destroyed eleven years of numb peace with one half-whispered syllable, there in the ship's lab, our fourth morning on Alphecca II.

I LOOKED at him for perhaps thirty seconds. Moistening my lips, I asked, "What do you mean, Brock?"

"You know what I mean," The flat, declarative tone was one of simple truth. "The one thing we haven't been asking ourselves all these years, because we knew we didn't have an answer for it and we *like* to have answers for things. *Why* are we here, on Alphecca II—with a hundred sixty-three visited worlds behind us?"

I shrugged. "You didn't have to start this, Brock." Outside the sun was climbing toward noon height, but I felt cold and dry, as if the ammonia atmosphere were seeping into the ship. It wasn't.

"No," he agreed, "I didn't have to start this. I could have let it fester for another eleven years. But it came popping out, and I want to settle it. We left Earth because we didn't like it there. Agreed?"

I nodded.

"BUT THAT's not *why* enough," he persisted. "Why do we explore? Why do we keep running from planet to planet, from one crazy air-

less ball to the next, out here where there are no people and no cities? Green crabs on Rigel V, sandfish on Caph. Dammit, Hammond, what are we looking for?"

Very calmly I said, "Ourselves, maybe?"

His face crinkled scornfully. "Foggy-eyed and imprecise, and you know it. We're not *looking* for ourselves out here. We're trying to *lose* ourselves. Eh?"

"No!"

"Admit it!"

I stared through the quartz window at the stiff, almost wooden vines that covered the pebbly ground. They seemed to be moving faintly, to be stretching their rigid bodies in a contraction of some sort.

In a dull, tired voice, Brock said, "We left Earth because we couldn't cope with it. It was too crowded and too dirty for sensitive, shrinking souls like us. We had the choice of withdrawing into shells, and huddling there for eighty or ninety years, or pulling up and leaving for space. We left. There's no society out here, just each other."

"We've adjusted to each other," I pointed out.

"So? Does that mean we could fit into Earth society? Would you want to go back? Remember the team—McKees and Haugmuth, is it? —who spent thirty-three years in space and came back. They were catatonic eight minutes after landing, the report said."

"LET ME give you a simpler why," I ventured. "Why did you start griping all of a sudden? Why couldn't you hold it in?"

"That's not a simpler why. It's part of the same one. I came to an answer, and I didn't like it. I got the answer that we were out here because we couldn't make the grade on Earth."

"No!"

He smiled apologetically. "No? All right, then. Give me another answer. I want an answer, Hammond. I need one, now."

I pointed to the synthesizer. "Why don't you have a drink instead?"

"That comes later," he said somberly. "After I've given up trying to find out."

The stippling of fine details was becoming a sharp-focus picture. Brock—self-reliant Brock, self-contained—had come to the end of his self-sufficiency. He had looked too deeply beneath the surface.

"At the age of eight," I began, "I asked my father what was outside the universe. That is, defining the universe as That Which Contains Everything, could there possibly be some thing or some place outside its bounds? He looked at me for a minute or two, then laughed and told me not to worry about it. But I did worry about it; I stayed up half the night worrying about it, and my head hurt by morning. I never

found out what was outside the universe."

"The universe is infinite," said Brock moodily. "Recurving in on itself, topologically..."

"Maybe. But I worried over it. I worried over First Cause. I worried all through my adolescence. Then I stopped worrying."

He smiled acidly. "You became a vegetable. You rooted yourself in the mud of your own ignorance, and decided not to pull loose because it was too painful. Am I right, Hammond?"

"No. I joined the Exploratory Corps."

I DREAMED, that night, as I swung in my hammock. It was a vivid and unpleasant dream, which stayed with me well into the following morning as a sort of misshapen reality that had attached itself to me in the night.

I had been a long time falling asleep. Brock had brooded most of the day, and a long hike over the bleak tundra had done little to improve his mood. Toward nightfall he dialed a few drinks, inserted a disk of Sibelius in his ear, and sat staring glumly at the darkening sky outside the ship. Alphecca II was moonless. The night was the black of space, but that the atmosphere blurred the neighboring stars.

I remember drifting off into a semi-sleep: a halfsom-

nolence in which I was aware of Brock's harsh breathing to my left, but yet in which I had no volition, no control over my limbs. And after that state came sleep, and with it—dreams.

THE DREAM must have grown from Brock's bitter remark, *You became a vegetable. You rooted yourself in the mud of your own ignorance.*

I accepted the statement literally. Suddenly I was a vegetable, possessed of all my former faculties, but rooted in the soil.

Rooted.

Straining for freedom, straining to break away, caught eternally by my legs, thinking, thinking...

Never to move, except for a certain thrashing of the upper limbs.

Rooted.

I writhed, longing to get as far as the rocky hill beyond, only as far as the next yard, the next yard, the next inch. But I had lost all motility; it was as if my legs were grasped in a mighty trap, and, without pain, without torment, I was bound to the earth.

I woke, finally, damp with perspiration. In his hammock, Brock slept, seemingly peacefully. I considered waking him and telling him of the nightmare, but decided against it. I tried to return to sleep.

At length, I slept.
Dreamlessly.

THE PRE-SET alarm throbbed at 0700; dawn had preceded us by nearly an hour.

Brock was up first; I sensed him moving about even as I stirred toward wakefulness. Still caught up in the strange unreal reality of my nightmare, I wondered on a conscious level if today would be like yesterday—if Brock, obsessed by his sudden thirst for an answer would continue to brood and sulk.

I hoped not. It would mean the end of our team if Brock cracked up; after eleven years, I was not anxious for a new partner.

"Hammond? You up yet?"

His voice had lost the edgy quality of yesterday, but there was something new and subliminally frightening in it.

Yawning, I replied, "Just about. Dial breakfast for me, will you?"

"I did already. But get out of the sack and come look at this."

I lurched from the hammock, shook my head to clear it, and started forward.

"Where are you?"

"Second level. At the window. Come take a look."

I climbed the spiral catwalk to the viewing-station; Brock stood with his back toward me, looking out. As I drew near, I said, "I had the strangest dream last night..."

"The hell with that. Look."

AT FIRST, I didn't notice anything strange. The bright-colored landscape seemed to be unchanged; pebbly orange soil, dark-blue trees, a tangle of green vines, the murk of the morning atmosphere. But then I saw I had been looking too far from home.

Writhing up the side of the window, just barely visible to the right, was a gnarled knobby green rope. Rope? No. It was one of the vines.

"They're all over the ship," Brock said. "I've checked all the ports. During the night the damned things must have come crawling up the side of the ship like so many snakes and wrapped themselves around us. I guess they figure we're here to stay, and they can use us as bracing-posts, the way they use those trees."

I stared with mixed repugnance and fascination at the hard bark of the vine, at the tiny suckers that held it fast to the smooth skin of our ship.

"That's funny," I said. "It's sort of an attack by extraterrestrial monsters, isn't it?"

WE SUITED up and went outside to have a look at the "attackers." At a distance of a hundred yards, the ship looked weirdly bemired. Its graceful lines were broken by the winding fingers of the vine, spiralling up its sleek sides from a thick parent stem on the ground. Other shoots of the vine sprawled near us,

clutching futilely at us as we moved among them.

I was reminded of my dream. Somewhat hesitantly I told Brock about it.

He laughed. "Rooted, eh? You were dreaming *that* while those vines were busy wrapping themselves around the ship. Significant?"

"Perhaps." I eyed the tough vines speculatively. "Maybe we'd better move the ship. If much more of that stuff gets around it, we may not be able to blast off at all."

Brock knelt and flexed a shoot of vine. "The ship could be completely cocooned in this stuff and we'd still be able to take off. A spacedrive wields a devil of a lot of thrust. We'll manage."

And *whick!*

A tapering finger of the vine arched suddenly and whipped around Brock's middle. *Whick! Whick!*

Like animated rope, like a bark-covered serpent, it curled about him. I drew back, staring. He seemed half amused, half perplexed.

"The thing's got pull, all right," he said. He was smiling lopsidedly, annoyed at having let so simple thing as a vine interfere with his freedom of motion. But then he winced in obvious pain.

"...Tightening," he gasped.

THE VINE contracted muscularly; it skittered two or three feet toward the tree from which its parent stock

sprang, and Brock was jerked suddenly off balance. As the corded arm of the vine yanked him backward he began to topple, poising for what seemed like seconds on his left foot, right jutting awkwardly in the air, arms clawing for balance.

Then he fell.

I was at his side in a moment, carefully avoiding the innocent-looking vine-tips to right and left. I planted my foot on the trailing vine that held Brock. I levered downward and grabbed the tip where it bound his waist. I pulled; Brock pushed.

The vine yielded.

"It's giving," he grunted. "A little more."

"Maybe I'd better go back for the blaster," I said.

"No. No telling what this thing may do while you're gone; it may cut me in two. Pull!"

I pulled. The vine struggled against our combined strength, writhed, twisted; but gradually we prevailed. It curled upward, loosened, went limp. Finally it drooped away, leaving Brock in liberty.

HHE GOT UP slowly, rubbing his waist.

"Hurt?"

"Just the surprise. Tropistic reaction on the plant's part; I must have triggered some hormone-chain to make it do that." He eyed the now-quiet vine with respect.

"It's not the first time we've

been attacked," I said. "Alpheraz III..."

"Yes."

I hadn't needed to mention it. Alpheraz III had been a hellish jungle planet; the image in his mind, as it was in mine, was undoubtedly that of a tawny beast the size of a goat held in the inexorable grip of some stocky-trunked plant, rising in the air, vanishing into a waiting mouth of the carnivorous tree...

...and seconds later, another tendril dragging *me* aloft. Only a hasty blaster-shot by Brock keeping me from being a plant's dinner.

We returned to the ship, entering the hatch a few feet from one of the vines that now encrusted it. Brock unsuited; the vine had left a red, raw line about his waist.

"The plant tried," I said.

"To kill me?"

"No. To move on. To get going. To see what was behind the next hill."

He frowned and said, "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not so sure, yet; I'm not good at seeing patterns. But it's taking shape. I'm getting it now, Brock. I'm getting it all. Dammit, I'm getting your answer!"

HE MASSAGED his stomach. "Go ahead," he said. "Think it out loud."

"I'm putting it together out of my dream, and out of the things you said, and out of

the vines down there." I walked slowly about the cabin. "Those plants—they're stuck there, aren't they? They grow in a certain place and that's where they remain. Maybe they wiggle a little, and maybe they writhe, but that's the size of it."

"They can grow long."

"Sure. But not infinitely long. They can't grow long enough to reach another planet. They're rooted, Brock; their condition is permanently fixed. Brock, suppose those plants had brains."

"I don't think this has anything to do with..."

"It does," I said. "Just assume those plants are intelligent. They want to go. They're stuck. So one of them lashed out in fury at you. *Jealous* fury."

HE NODDED, seeing it clearly now. "Sure. We don't have roots; we can go places. We can visit a hundred sixty-four worlds and walk all over them."

"That's your answer, Brock. There's the *why* you were looking for." I took a deep breath. "You know why we go out to explore? Not because we're running away. Not because there's some inner compulsion driving us to coast from planet to planet. Uh-uh. It's because we *can* do it. That's all the 'why' you need. We explore because it's possible for us to explore."

Some of the harshness faded.

ed from his face. "We're special," he said. "We can move. It's the privilege of humanity. The thing that makes us us."

I didn't need to say any more. After eleven years, we don't need to vocalize every thought. But we had it, now: the special uniqueness that those clutching vines down there envied so much. Motility.

We left Alphecca II finally, and moved on. We did the other worlds of the system and headed outward, far out this time, as much of a hop as we could make. And we moved on from there to the next sun, and from there to the next, and onward.

We took a souvenir with us

from Alphecca II, though. When we blasted off, the vine that had wrapped itself round the ship gripped us so tightly that it wasn't shaken loose by the impact of blastoff. It remained hugging us as we thrust into space, dangling, roots and all. We finally got tired of looking at it, and Brock went out in a spacesuit to chop it away from the ship. He gave it a push, imparted velocity to it, and the vine went drifting off sunward.

It had achieved its goal: it had left its home world. But it had died in the attempt. And that was the difference, we thought—all the difference in the universe—as we headed outward and outward, across the boundless gulfs.

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QUIS CUSTODIET



IT IS THE simple questions which can be the most devastating. The Roman Senate was trying to set up a system of checks and controls, means of safeguarding the rights of citizens. It had been proposed that special offices be created, the holders of which would be the nation's official watchman, "*custodians*". Somewhere in the midst of general feelings of self-congratulation, one senator arose and asked, "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodians?*" Who watches the Watchmen?

Here is a neat dilemma. If we have to stay up to be sure that the watchman doesn't go to sleep, enter into collusion with burglars, or try a little burgling of his own, then there's no point in having a watchman. Yet, granting that most watchmen will be both efficient and faithful to their duty, how can we be sure about any particular one?

The answer is as simple as the question: we can't. We can't be 100% sure about any individual watchman, because no human being is perfect. He may be incorruptible, but nonetheless a fool; he may be 99% honest, but then succumb to a temptation that exploits his individual frailty; he may have had a fine record because, up to now, there wasn't the proper opportunity for thievery, or he didn't see anything he considered worth the trouble.

THE FOLLOWING letter shows how the question applies to science fiction.

297 Canyon Drive
Columbus 14, Ohio

Dear Mr. Lowndes:

Your editorial, "Not Both Ways" had some very interesting points, and I enjoyed it. But I disagree with your basic thesis. I think we can have it both ways, and more-

over that we probably will. I am in favor of "literary criticism" applied to science fiction, personally, but I'll not let it spoil my fun.

But there arises here an important point. Who's going to criticize the critics?

I'd like to let off steam here about a pet peeve of mine—namely, the "boil that writes like a man", damon knight. I enjoy most literary criticism, and sometimes knight makes some worthwhile points; the man has talent, I'll grant him that. But much of what knight does is *not* legitimate criticism; he's practising a form of voodoo. He makes little "paper" dolls, viciously distorted out of context, and sticks verbal pins in them.

I contend there should be standards for the *critic* as well as the author, and that sadists posing as critics should be as mercilessly exposed as the flaws they purport to reveal. Most people—even literary critics!—if they are going to criticize someone, will try to do it in a courteous way. Knight does just the opposite: if he ever feels forced to praise an author's work, he somehow contrives to do it in a nasty way.

So who's going to criticize the critics? This is, it seems to me, basically the responsibility of the editors. You can, if you wish, provide (within reason) space for authors and/or readers to reply—es-

pecially to distortions which otherwise may get to be accepted as true, if only because some people are prone to believe the worst.

I don't mean to be telling you how to edit; actually this is a general comment. But something ought to be done about this boil that writes like a man. If he'd only tone it down a little, he'd do a lot of good. As it is, if he isn't stopped, he's going to start a reign of terror which will, in my opinion, do science fiction more harm than good.

—ART COULTER

THE SOLUTION to the problem is not hopeless, as it may appear above. We can't be 100% sure about any individual watchman, or critic, but critics can criticize each other. Each individual critic has his own frailties—blind spots, personal animosities or predilections, mannerisms which may interfere with clarity of expression, etc; but no two critics will have exactly the same faults. Thus, Critic B, who may not be aware of his own tendency to find magnificent connotations in almost any story dealing with tree-surgery, can nonetheless point out Critic A's internal aversions to steeples, which make it impossible for him to examine fairly any story whose protagonist is a steeplejack, etc.

B. H. Haggin takes notice of the same problem in music

criticism, and writes: "The unwritten code of American music critics who are gentlemen is that one mentions a fellow-critic only to pay him a compliment or does not mention him at all, and in this way assures oneself of the same consideration. The English tradition is that one corrects a fellow-critic's error and takes the consequences. This make for less comfortable critics, but for better criticism, and in this way for more enlightened readers."*

And it can certainly be said of science fiction, as Haggin says of music, that criticism is a part of the scene, a part which shapes the scene to a larger extent than might be realized, therefore, criticism and critics should be watched vigilantly. He goes on to state, "...I once pointed out here that Shaw was the finest of music critics not only because of the critical resources he brought to the job, but because of the integrity that caused him to use all these resources of knowledge, taste, literary skill, and wit to deal rigorously with his subject as it required to be dealt with; and the bad critic is one who allows himself to be deflected from such rigorous justice. He may...in Shaw's words, be 'afraid of his friends, of his enemies, of his editor, of his own ignorance,'

and 'hopelessly muzzled by the mere mass of [his] personal acquaintance.' Or he may use his subject to show off what he thinks are his knowledge, taste, literary skill, and wit..."

THERE'S a difference between bringing knowledge, taste, literary skill, and wit to bear upon the particular work criticized, and merely showing off—although both may make for enjoyable reading. In the first instance, all the knowledge, taste, literary skill, and wit displayed are employed in a manner relevant to the work at hand, for the purpose of close examination and the necessary demonstration of the reasons for a judgement; in the second instance, the display is irrelevant, or does not constitute close examination of the work at hand, or does not lead into an explanation of the judgement. Skillful showing-off can, however, dazzle the unwary reader into thinking that he has seen an integrated performance where he has seen only fireworks and card tricks. Even the wary and informed reader can be taken in; that is why critics should criticize critics. Not that a layman *cannot* do this adequately at times, but rather that the odds are against the untrained reader's coming up with the right attack for the right reason. (This is a free country; every

**Music In The Nation*, B. H. Haggin, William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1949; page 18 ff.

reader has the *right* to criticize any critic who displeases him; however, the possession of this right does not necessarily include the ability to use it meaningfully, so that it will bear weight upon the informed.)

WHAT THE untrained reader can do, and should do if he wishes to take part in the operation, is to demand that a given critic show cause for judgements, or for the tone of his statements. The question is not, in the present instance, "Was *damon knight* brutal in such-and-such an operation?" but "Was *damon knight's* brutality in these instances relevant and necessary to the operation?" There are times when violence and brutality in criticism are indeed both relevant and necessary; the reader must be shocked at what is shocking; he must be jolted out of his ignorance to, indifference to, and/or acquiescence in shockingly bad performances, and to situations which call forth such performances.

This necessity assumes that the reader reads criticism because he cares, because he wants to learn what is bad and why it is bad—as well as why what is good is good; otherwise, there is no point in reading criticism. That is why complaints that such-and-such a critic (*damon knight* in the present example) is "sadistic" etc., are so

often viewed with suspicion. The reader who doesn't really care is the one most likely to ask plaintively, "Why can't critics be gentlemen? Why do they have to be so unpleasant, etc.?"

As I stated in a former editorial, I do not pretend to be able to read *knight's* mind, or to look into his heart; therefore I cannot judge whether his anathemas are free from sadism. I can state that numerous instances of what appear to be sheer nastiness are relevant and necessary shock-tactics, because (a) the accusations were sound, as I discovered when I examined the work or works in question (b) in some instances I hadn't been aware of the flaws disclosed (c) in some instances, I knew the material was inferior, but hadn't taken thought sufficiently to realize that it was atrociously bad (d) in the instance of (b) and (c) I would not have been brought to this realization had *knight's* statements not needled me into looking up the sources (e) assimilation of the criticism has enlightened me.

Critic *knight* is invited to answer Mr. Coulter in these pages.

EXAMINATION of critics by critics can be found in literature outside the science fiction field. Two examples, which come to my mind immediately, are Stanley Edgar

Hyman's "*The Armed Vision*" and "*The Critical Performance*", both issued by Vintage Books. The first is subtitled "A study in the methods of modern literary criticism", while the second examines particular essays by various critics. I can't report upon "*The Critical Performance*", which I have not read, but "*The Armed Vision*" contains much valuable material

which can and should be brought to play upon science fiction performances, where relevant—unless you consider that science fiction isn't worth examining and improving, or that it is above criticism, or that it is great literature, but somehow not subject to the standards of literature.

With the latter attitude I have no patience whatsoever.
RAWL



NEXT TIME AROUND

To those who have read "*The Cold Equations*," author Tom Godwin needs no introduction. For those who have not, I'll say that the story mentioned above is remembered for a quality too seldom found in science fiction: character-portrayal and development which makes what easily could have been just another melodrama, a completely believable story. And I think you'll find similar elements in his featured novelet, "*The Wild Ones*".

Newcomers, so far as I know, are Nicholas G. Lordi and Dick Hetschel. Both make their debut in this magazine, at any rate, with novelets; the former offers a thoughtful yarn called "*Death Wish*", while the latter's "*The Better Egg*" is high comedy of a sort to serve as a remedy against getting too grim over the transition of science fiction to literature.

And by the time you see Emsh's January cover, we hope that the distribution louse-up will have been straightened out!

DELAY - TEMPORARY

by Charles V. DeVet

illustrated by ORBAN

Albrecht would be stranded on overcrowded Earth if he didn't recover his passport. And his finding it largely depended on learning why it had been stolen.

DOLORES had dimples on her knees.

As he shaved, Ken Albrecht observed her in the mirror. She sat on the small table and swung her legs, smiling all the while at his reflection in the mirror. Once her glance traveled down to his bare upper torso. "You're a handsome brute," she said.

Albrecht ignored the remark. "What's your last name?"

"Pollnow."

She continued to swing her legs, and Albrecht watched the dimples wink on and off in the mirror as he went on shaving. "Just what does this hostess service of yours include?"

"The Port of St. Paul does

its best to see that visitors to Earth are properly entertained. I hope my assistance this far has been of some help."

Albrecht grunted.

With her head Dolores indicated a bundle at her side. "I bought you a suit of clothes, and a cloak for evening wear." She glanced at the trousers Albrecht wore, and at his shirt hanging on the back of a chair at his side. "These are a bit more colorful than what you're wearing, but they're the height of Earth fashion at the moment. How do you like your room?" she asked with another of her quick changes of conversational topic.

Albrecht paused in his shaving and glanced around

The girl was the only one who could have stolen Albrecht's passport.



at the room's cramped furnishings. A bed, wide enough to sleep two, but narrower than he was accustomed to; two straight chairs and an adjustable-back armchair; a wash basin, with a small medicine cabinet above, the table on which Dolores sat; and a curtained shower in one corner, were economically spaced in a room no larger than twelve by fifteen feet. There was no closet. Clothes had to be hung on hooks on one wall.

"It would seem you could have found something a little less crowded," he observed without complaint.

DOLORES' eyes widened in mild reproof. "Have you forgotten that this is Earth, the most densely-populated planet in the Federation of Human Worlds? A room like this is considered generously large." She continued swinging her legs.

Albrecht pulled the abras-brush sharply away from his cheek and muttered under his breath. The dimples had taken his mind from the job at hand and the brush had worn a pink, smarting, spot on his right cheek.

Dolores laughed and Albrecht felt a slow flow of blood rising to his face. He tried to cover his embarrassment with a show of gruffness. "Any particular reason why you're still here? Didn't I pay as much as you expected?"

Dolores chose to ignore his lack of courtesy. "No pay was necessary. This is part of my job. Your tip was generous."

"Then why are you hanging around?" Albrecht quickly decided that the best way to get rid of her was to be unpleasant. He was tired and irritable from his space flight, and right now he wanted to relax more than he wanted feminine company.

Dolores looked hurt. "Don't you like me?"

"You're very charming. Perhaps tomorrow...or the day after..." Albrecht let the sentence hang with its unvoiced suggestion. Dolores continued to smile, seemingly unaware of the hint behind the words.

Albrecht tried again. "I'll have to change clothes. And as I see no way that I can do it in privacy, with you here..."

Dolores nodded agreeably. "Don't mind me."

Albrecht walked to where she sat and put his hands under her shoulders. Lifting her from the table he carried her to the room's entrance-way. He set her down beside the door, opened it, and gently but firmly propelled her out into the hall. "It's been nice," he said.

Dolores wrinkled her nose spitefully at him as he closed the door.

TEN MINUTES later, Ken Albrecht discovered that

his wallet was missing. He hadn't been carrying much money; he had taken the precaution of depositing most of it in the inter-world bank at the airport. But the wallet had contained his passport.

He finished dressing, tucked a small flat pistol in his armpit, and hurried outside the huge apartment building. In a street flanked by double rows of almost identical buildings he hailed a cab and was driven back to the spaceport. At the information desk, he was informed that the director of spaceport personnel was a Mr. John Wrestler.

WRESTLER was a stout man in his late fifties, with a pinkly bald head and pink hair, and an incongruously black, pointed mustache. Beneath the mustache his lips formed two raised ridges—as though padded underneath—and dipped into the hollows of hairless cheeks. It was a totally humorless face.

"And you feel certain that it was the girl who took your wallet?" he asked Albrecht.

"I had it when we went into my room—I took a bill from it to deposit in the rent slot before I entered—and I didn't have it after she'd left."

"What did you say her name was?" Wrestler took a paper from the upper left hand drawer of his desk.

"Dolores Pollnow."

Wrestler went quickly down a list of names on the paper in his hand. "We don't have anyone by that name employed here; I'm afraid there's nothing I can do for you."

"Just a minute!" Albrecht's voice was angry. He had half risen from his chair. Now he checked himself and resumed his seat. "Do you realize how important this is to me? I intended to stay for only the three days between flights. But unless I get that passport back I'm stuck here—for good."

"I realize that." Wrestler's expression could not have shown less interest. "There has been such an illicit traffic in visas, and subsequent opportunity for criminals to escape punishment by fleeing to other worlds, that it became necessary to make the traveler solely responsible for the safekeeping of his passport. But of course that is something outside my province. Now if there is nothing more I can do for you..."

WRESTLER'S speech was cut off abruptly as Albrecht reached across the desk and dug the fingers of both hands into the neck front of his blouse. Albrecht set himself and jerked the ineffectually struggling official across the glass top of the desk.

His face was white with anger as he twisted Wrest-

ler around and shoved him backward into a chair at the side of the desk. "Perhaps this will help you be a little less casual about it," Albrecht gritted. He loosened his grip on Wrestler's blouse front.

"This is an outrage," Wrestler blurted. "The law..."

Albrecht cut off his protestations with another twist of the cloth in his hands. "I don't give a damn about the law. What worse trouble can I get into than I'm in right now? Come up with something that will help me get that passport back, or the next time I shut your wind off you won't breathe again."

He held his grip until Wrestler's eyes began to roll slowly back. Albrecht released him and waited.

Wrestler breathed deeply, the wind making a harsh noise in his windpipe as he sucked it in. "I'll do what I can," he said as soon as he was able to speak. "Tell me what you want."

Albrecht sat down on the desk above him. "I'll admit that the girl probably didn't give her right name," he said, "but she did have 'Dolores' stamped on her cap front. Do you have any girls working for you with that first name?"

"I'll see," Wrestler answered. He pulled himself to his feet and walked hesitantly around the desk. He made

an effort to straighten his rumpled clothing as we went.

Albrecht remained where he was sitting. "Don't try to press any buttons," he said, his voice flat and expressionless. "Anyone you call would get here too late to save you."

"I had no such intention." Wrestler was making an effort to regain his lost dignity. He picked the typed list from the floor where it had fallen. "I have a Dolores Gabriel, and a Dolores Lutschner," he said, going down the list. "What did the girl who took your passport look like?"

"A TALL BRUNET, with her hair cut short. She smiled a lot, and had very nice teeth. And dimples. Exceptionally beautiful." He paused. "That's about all, I guess."

"The description could fit about every tenth girl on Earth," Wrestler said sardonically.

"What do the two Doloreses you have look like?"

"I have their pictures here somewhere," Wrestler said. He dug in the drawer at his left again and brought up a large envelope and took out a handful of pictures. He glanced back at the list, murmured "24 and 85", and picked two pictures from the pile and handed them to Albrecht.

Dolores Gabriel was a red-

head. Dolores Lutscher was a short-haired brunet. But there all similarity to the girl in Albrecht's room ended "Give me the rest of those pictures," he said.

He went carefully through the pile Wrestler handed him. The girl he sought was not there.

While Albrecht looked at the pictures, Wrestler walked to a cabinet on the wall at his back and took out a bottle of bourbon and a small waterglass. He poured the glass half full and drank it, his face twisting into the look of agonized distress of a heavy drinker. He made no offer of any to Albrecht. "Find anything?" he asked as he put the bottle and glass back into the cabinet and returned to his desk.

Albrecht shook his head and slumped back where he sat. "I'm sorry about roughing you up," he said after a moment. "That temper is a very nasty fault of mine."

Wrestler dismissed the incident with a brushing motion of his hand. His earlier disinterest had returned. "If there's nothing else I can do for you..."

Albrecht rose. "I won't distress you with my troubles any longer," he said dryly.

"I'll try to bear your misfortune with equanimity," Wrestler answered in the same tone of voice. The bourbon had given him renewed courage.

Albrecht bowed with spurious courtesy and let himself out.

ON THE WAY back to his room, Ken Albrecht found himself walking behind a tall man with broad shoulders. He observed the man, and two pedestrians who walked toward him, without conscious attention. In the same way, he noted also that just ahead a gray-haired man poked with a stick at a pile of refuse in an alley entrance. And when it happened, Albrecht was too stunned to move until it was over.

The tall stranger ahead of him twisted suddenly sideways and clutched the old man about the shoulders. With his right arm he circled the scrawny, whiskered neck and forced the man's head back.

The oldster yelled once and kicked out frantically, spinning his attacker half around. As they faced him Albrecht saw the gray haired one's mouth open wide in the extremity of his pain, but no sound came from his straining lips. The tall man jerked back his right arm with sudden ruthless force, and Albrecht heard a dull snap.

He watched in shocked fascination as the old man's body went limp and slid slowly down the front of his slayer.

The tall man's face had held its same expression dur-

ing the entire brief encounter. There was no hate or anger there; nothing except a determined efficiency. Now he looked down for a minute at his victim before he walked on.

Albrecht came out of his stupor and looked about quickly for someone representing the law of the city. The only other persons in sight were the two men he had seen approaching earlier. They had watched the killing with little more than curiosity interest, and soon they moved on down the street.

LOGIC CAUTIONED Albrecht to mind his own business—he couldn't risk any more trouble on this strange world than he already had—but his indignation pushed him forward. He drew the flat gun from his armpit and strode after the killer. Pushing the nose of his gun against the broad back ahead of him he gritted, "Keep walking!"

The other hesitated for only an instant before obeying. He turned his head and looked at Albrecht over his shoulder. "Do I know you, sir?"

"You don't," Albrecht answered curtly.

"May I ask where you are taking me?"

"To the nearest policeman," Albrecht replied.

The tall man hesitated

again, then shrugged and went on.

They found a green-clad policeman around the next corner. "This man has just committed a murder," Albrecht told him.

The green-clad raised his eyebrows slightly. He regarded the tall man and seemed to observe something about his dress. "A commissionaire?" he asked.

The man nodded. He drew a paper from his breast pocket and handed it to the officer. "My warrant. You will find a committment attached to it, signed by Peerre Del-fac, the dead man's second son."

The officer handed back the paper. "I will have the body collected. You may go." He turned to Ken Albrecht. "I judge by your accent, sir, that you are a stranger to our world?"

"That's right."

"Allow me to assure you that this man's actions, which you have just witnessed, were perfectly legal," the officer said. While his words were polite, his attitude was one of impatient tolerance. And in his eyes was a look only partially concealed, a look of dislike for a foreigner.

"Is it legal to kill a defenseless old man?" Albrecht asked sarcastically.

The policeman shrugged with cynical indifference and moved on.

THE TALL man had not left as the policeman walked away. Now he said to Albrecht, "Our police are not sympathetic with what they regard as interference by outsiders. but I do not wish to appear as a monster to you. Will you grant me the pleasure of buying you a voyae?" He spoke with an odd formality that Albrecht recognized as his normal manner.

"Why should I drink with you?"

"For no reason," the tall man answered, without resentment, "except, perhaps, to have your curiosity satisfied."

For some reason Albrecht found himself almost liking the man. And by now he realized that he had somehow made a fool of himself. The other was probably evidencing great tolerance in treating him so civilly; further, this man might be able to help him with his own problem. "All right," he agreed shortly, not quite able to match the other's courtesy.

"My name is Barry Effress," the tall man introduced himself, and bowed briefly as Albrecht gave his own name.

THEY WALKED until they came to a drinking place and entered. Against one wall they found an empty table and sat down. Albrecht said he'd have a brandy and Effress punched the brandy button in the automat-

ic dispenser twice. "What is your home world?"

"Mogden IV. It's in the Orion's Belt sector," Albrecht added as Effress' face showed no sign of recognition. "It was colonized by Earth about two thousand years ago."

"My geography is not too good," Effress apologized in his formal manner. "May I be allowed to explain now what happened out there?"

"I wish you would."

"On Earth, it is the duty of a son to kill his parents after they reach the age of sixty," Effress explained. "Most of the sons do not desire to perform the disagreeable task themselves. I am what is known as a commissionaire, we perform such unpleasant duties for others. I was committed by a man named Delfac—the old one's second son—to kill him."

"But what is the purpose of such senseless slaughter?"

"Purpose?" Effress repeated. "I suppose it is population control. But it is not murder—as you seem to regard it. For there is recarn."

"Recarn?"

"The old person will live again in the son's next born."

"Is that belief universal with you?"

"It is the world religion." Effress was thoughtful for a moment. "Recently a semi-religious group headed by a man named Richard Vingers had been denying the truth of that belief. They have been

successful in convincing a large number of people that the killing of old persons is a cruel and ungodly practice. Whether they are right I cannot say, but most regard them as irresponsible fanatics. Last week, the government declared Vingers an enemy of the state, he will be put to death if he is found."

"I FIND I agree wholeheartedly with Vingers," Albrecht commented. "Such killing is bloodthirsty and barbarous."

"I might regard many of your customs in the same light, if I knew more about them," Effress replied without heat.

"That's true, of course," Albrecht agreed. He hesitated. "May I ask you a personal question—perhaps at the risk of offending you?"

"I will not be offended."

"Is your profession looked upon as...decent...by the others of Earth?"

Effress drew a thin cigar cube from a breast pocket and appeared thoroughly preoccupied with rolling it between his palms, and lighting it. Nothing in the steel-like courtesy of his manner seemed changed as he spoke, yet his tone was gentle and dead as he said, "My profession is regarded with envy by those without the courage to pursue it."

Albrecht realized instantly that he had made another mis-

take. "I'm sorry. I meant no offense."

Effress smiled wearily and relaxed in his chair. "I have never explained this to anyone before," he said. "Simply because I never found anyone who would listen, and understand. I think you might. Anyway, here it is—for whatever you make of it.

"Every man," Effress went on, "has within him that which he is. The coward buries it, that he might not have to face its obligations. Or he expresses it only by surrender to the invigorating lunacy of herd action. The brave man follows this thing—though he may know he will die sooner for it. My work is dangerous: Few commissionaires ever reach the age where their sons must send them to recarn. Yet I do not claim to be brave; rather I have the desire—the inner need—to do those things which most other men would be afraid to do. I might state it otherwise by saying that I desire to live as if I were to die the next moment. That alone will satisfy me. By living my life so there is always danger I find alcoves now and then that give me flashes of the stimulation I must have. And I must admit I have the vanity to be pleased with the admiration I know I receive from those about me." He paused and laughed in semi-embarrassment. "Am I a fool?"

"You certainly are not," Albrecht stated emphatically. "While I may not agree with the way you follow your star, I can only admire your courage in doing it."

THE DRINKING place had become more crowded as they sat talking. Albrecht was surprised to notice that women mingled freely with the men. On Mogden, women would never think of entering such a place.

He was a bit disconcerted when two women came up to their table and stood waiting silently.

He glanced across at Effress. The tall man was watching him, smiling at his obvious uncertainty.

Albrecht looked back at the two women. One was small and blonde, with meager beauty. The other was built in heroic proportions, with a skin fair and untinted, and hair combed in black waves to the back of her head. Her breasts were only partly concealed by a stiff cloth cowl that hung over them. "Are you gentlemen expecting?"

Here, as on Mogden, Albrecht reflected musingly, young maidens hunted in pairs. "Thanks for asking," he said to the dark girl. "Perhaps later."

She lifted her shoulders in the universal Earth gesture, and the two girls walked away, swaying their hips as they went.

"Would you not enjoy being in jostling harness with the bounteous one?" Effress asked, only the slight quirk at the corner of his mouth betraying the amusement he felt.

"I hadn't considered it," Albrecht answered uncomfortably. He sought to change the topic of conversation. "Would you care for another drink?" Without waiting for an answer he punched the brandy button twice.

EFFRESS was enjoying Albrecht's loss of poise. "On Earth many believe that chastity is a dangerous abstinence. It makes a man vulnerable to certain illnesses." His smile returned. "Fortunately our women do their best to keep us in good health."

"How would your wife regard any philandering?" Albrecht asked, trying to shift his discomfort to Effress.

"My wife? If she objected, she would be wise to keep silent. A husband has the right of life or death over his wife."

Albrecht shook his head, but did not argue. "I need the help of a man like yourself," he said without preliminaries. "Are you available to work for me?"

After only a brief hesitation, Effress nodded.

Albrecht told him all that had happened since he landed on Earth.

"What do you wish me to do?" Effress asked.

"My best chance to get my passport back, as I see it, is to find the girl. Do you think you can do that?"

"I could try."

"I'd appreciate it." Ken Albrecht wrote his address on a slip of paper and received in return a card from Effress with his name, telephone number, and address printed on it. "Ring me as soon as you find anything. I don't have much time."

Effress nodded and they rose to leave.

EARLY IN the evening Albrecht received a telephone call. "I'm at the spaceport," Effress said. "Using the description you gave me, I questioned some of the other hostesses, and two of them remember your girl. But it seems she just came on the job this morning, and they haven't seen her since. I tried to speak with Wrestler, but couldn't get into his office. Do you have any other suggestions?"

"Only that you continue to make inquiries. You probably know how to handle the job better than any way I could suggest."

"I'll do what I can." Effress hung up.

Albrecht had a meal sent up to his room, ate, and lay down to rest. He fell asleep within a few minutes.

He awoke some time after midnight. At first he wasn't

certain what it was that had disturbed him. Just that one part of his mind, perhaps the portion that activated his intuition, was sounding an urgent warning of danger.

He sat up straight in bed. The light in the room went on. "It is now twenty-three minutes after twelve," the bedpost said. "You left a call for eight o'clock. Do you wish to cancel that call?"

Albrecht ignored the automaton. A small noise drew his attention to the doorknob. It was slowly moving, as though someone had turned it to see if it was locked, and was now cautiously letting it return to its resting position.

"Do you wish to cancel, your call?" the bedpost asked as Albrecht stepped quietly out of bed.

"Let it stand," Albrecht murmured impatiently. He stood in the middle of the room, thinking. Was this just a simple attempt at burglary? Or was there more to it?

He ran his fingers through his tousled hair and tried to think what he should do. First, he decided, he'd better be ready if they should succeed in getting in. He took the flat pistol from its place on the table and held it in his hand. Another thought came to him and he turned off the room's light and walked quietly to the window at the side of his bed and looked out. Across the street a man, faceless in the dark, stood

with his head turned toward Albrecht's window.

This was more than burglary; the net was already tight around him. He needed help. Another minute, and he had the obvious answer. Effress.

EFFRESS answered Albrecht's first call. Evidently the man was a light sleeper. Albrecht explained the situation quickly.

"I'll be over immediately. Do you have any plan in mind?"

"My first problem is to get out of here. Do you have an automobile?"

"Yes."

"Good. How long will it take you to get here?"

"I can make it in fifteen minutes."

"I'll allow twenty minutes. I'll come out of my room then. You wait for me at the front door. If you're able, cover anyone waiting in the lobby. You'll also have to keep in mind the man out in the street. You have that clear?"

"Right. I'll look for you in twenty minutes—exactly."

Albrecht hung up and dressed quietly. He found the padded chair against a farther wall and let himself ease into it. After a minute he noted the rigidity of his stomach muscles, and forced himself to relax. He realized that he was afraid, but was glad to note that it was not

the fear of panic. He took the safety catch off his pistol and laid it on his lap, and waited. Patiently.

TWICE DURING the next twenty minutes Albrecht heard movement in the hall outside his door, and once someone tried the doorknob again. But they made no attempt to force their way in.

When his time was up, Albrecht rose and unlocked the door. He put his pistol in his pocket, but kept his hand around it. As he stepped out into the hall a man slid around a corner at the far end. So far so good.

Albrecht reached the head of the stair without being stopped; however, two men stood close together at the foot. He glanced across the lobby and breathed a sigh of relief as he saw Effress leaning negligently against a doorframe. Both his hands were in his pockets.

Deliberately Albrecht paused and raised his free hand in greeting to Effress. The heads of both men at the foot of the stairs swiveled around—in time to see Effress nod casually back.

Albrecht started down the steps. When he reached a point one step from the waiting men he stopped. "Get the hell out of my way," he said very gently.

Involuntarily the two men moved apart. Albrecht strode

between them. As he walked toward the door he glanced at Effress and saw that he was facing them now. He walked past Effress and they went out through the door back to back.

ALBRECHT allowed himself to breathe freely again when they were in Effress' car. "Thanks. I saw the way those men looked at you. Apparently you have some reputation in affairs of this kind."

Effress shrugged the compliment aside. "They were merely hirelings, they will have to get further instructions before they know how to cope with the change in affairs. We should have you well hidden by then."

"I'm very grateful to you. Where do we go now?"

"I have a place where you'll be safe for a few days at least."

After a half-hour's drive, Effress parked his car in a public lot and they went ahead on foot. Albrecht noted that they were in the waterfront section of the city. Soon they reached a small wharf and walked across a plank to the roof of a rundown houseboat.

Effress led the way down a dark stairway and into a room without lights that smelled faintly of oil. He led Albrecht to a bunk. "Try to get some sleep. We'll talk again in the morning."

KEN ALBRECHT must have been more tired than he had known, for he was awakened by the noise of someone walking in the room, and saw by the watch on his wrist that it was after nine o'clock. He had to presume that it was morning, for no light came in from outside.

Concealed fluorescent tubes in the walls revealed that he was in the former engine room of the old houseboat. The engine had been removed from the center of the floor and the hole covered with a large patch of composition board. Plastic cloth was pasted over the portholes in the sides of the vessel. Two double-bunk cots were attached to each wall.

Effress had just let him sprawl back in a cot directly opposite Albrecht. In a make-shift chair that was actually a fishbox a third man sat regarding Albrecht from beneath bushy eyebrows that met above a red, thick, nose. The man had the face and figure of a bull, with large ears and great bony cheeks.

"Mr. Albrecht..Mr. Vingers." Effress nodded negligently at each man as he gave his name.

"How do you do?" This was the man Albrecht remembered, who had gotten into trouble with the Earth authorities by his opposition to their bloodletting practices. Apparently Effress was combining two jobs.

VINGERS made a reluctant rumble in his throat but gave no other reply.

"Mr. Vingers will be with us until the day after tomorrow," Effress explained. "He has a rendezvous with a plane that will fly him to our southern continent."

"That's a coincidence," Albrecht said. "I'll be leaving the same day, if I'm able to get my passport back." The third man did not seem to be in the mood to talk. "Are you still going to try to find that girl for me?" he asked Effress.

Effress nodded. "I intend to visit information central today. If I can give an accurate enough description of the girl I should be able to find out just who she is, and where she lives. Tell me every detail about her that might help."

"Wouldn't it be better if I went with you? You wouldn't recognize her even if you saw her."

"Later of course, I'll have to have you along," Effress answered. "But I'd better do the preliminary work alone. Also I thought I'd try to find the person or persons who threaten you. If I find them, we can decide what is best to do next: whether we should attempt negotiations, or move against them."

"The man who is trying to kill me is the same one who engineered the stealing of my passport. He probably learned that you were investigating

for me, and decided that he would be safer if he removed me."

"Very probably. But we have to find him first." Effress rolled up his sleeves, splashed water on his face from a sink set in the end wall and went out.

FOR SEVERAL hours after Effress had gone, Vingers did not speak, and Albrecht felt no inclination to begin a conversation. He tried to nap but Vingers' heavy-footed pacing of the room kept him from ever actually sleeping.

Finally Vingers stopped at his side and stood over him. "How can you lie there when we have to skulk down here like rats in a filthy hole?"

"What do you suggest we do?" Without defining the reason, Albrecht found himself disliking the man quite intensely.

Vingers lifted his shoulders irritably and continued his pacing. After another ten minutes passed he said, "Did it ever occur to you that we're both due to leave the same day; that I've got to get away from here or lose my life; that I could be a very logical suspect—the person who has your passport?"

"I'll keep it in mind." Albrecht had given the possibility some thought when he'd first found out who Vingers was. Only the fact that he'd

trusted Effress had made him decide against the possibility.

"Perhaps Effress actually works only for me." Vingers seemed to anticipate the trend of Albrecht's reasoning.

"That could be, but I'll have to take my chances that it isn't." Albrecht turned on his side, with his back to Vingers. He felt his temper rising, and knew that a few more words with Vingers would lead to a fight that would be foolhardy.

Vingers laughed.

EFFRESS returned during the early evening. "I couldn't find anyone fitting the description, exactly," he said. "See if you can remember more details tonight, and I'll try again tomorrow."

His total lack of success made Ken Albrecht suspect that perhaps Vingers had spoken the truth. But why should Vingers have mentioned it at all. Unless it was because of the very cantankerousness of his nature.

Yet it was evident by the surreptitious way Effress goaded the other man that he liked Vingers no more than did Albrecht.

Vingers became talkative as the night hours dragged on with their galling inactivity. "This is a sick world," he said, to neither of them in particular. "Suffering from a neurosis that compels it to draw the blood of innocent

victims. Men and women are killed while barely past their prime of life; husbands murder their wives, on the slightest pretext, or no pretext at all."

He turned his attention to Albrecht. "Did you know that every third child is automatically put to death at birth? That every child born on Wednesday suffers the same fate? Could anything be more absurd—more brutally, savagely, absurd?" He raised his hand in a clenched fist. "Those acts are violations of basic mortality. If there is a God, I say he must hate us for what we do."

HE WAS ABOUT to go on when Effress spoke. "We can barely feed the nearly thirty-five billion people we have on Earth now. If these were not killed, at least an equal number would starve. Do you have a better solution?"

"We could limit the population."

"That was tried, two hundred years ago." Reading between the words, Albrecht recognized that Effress was doing more than baiting the contentious Vingers: He was apologizing to Albrecht for Earth's savagery. "They were unable to control the growth of population. They squandered their natural resources to keep men fed and clothed, but nevertheless there was soon hunger, revolution, and

war. For a time there was no government, and men died in a wholesale, self-inflicted, extermination. If you want the present blood-letting stopped, you must give us a better alternative."

"You missed my point," Vingers continued his same argument, and Albrecht realized then that the man was not exceptionally intelligent. He was merely a fanatic who had learned to use the speech and ideas of a pedagog. "I am not advocating that we go back to old methods. I said we must use *intelligent* control. Then we will succeed."

"There is a beautiful and enlightening world of talk," Effress said, "in which everything makes sense. And there is another world—a more practical world—that is governed by the unintelligibility of necessity." His eyes closed and, as Vingers reiterated and expounded his argument, Effress' chest began a regular rise and fall. He had gone to sleep. Albrecht allowed himself to do the same.

THE NEXT day he had a brief talk with Effress. Their time was short, and they decided to concentrate on finding the girl, Dolores. They took the chance of visiting information center together.

They had no success. The description they gave was inadequate. Effress went on to

the spaceport, and Albrecht returned to the houseboat.

That night Effress was very discouraged. "I was still unable to get in to see Wrestler, and I turned up nothing new asking around."

Before he went to sleep, Albrecht momentarily had the feeling that he should know the answer to his problem. He felt that he had all the clues, but that he was not putting them together correctly.

In the morning he had the solution.

HE AROSE quietly, before the others awoke, and let himself out of the houseboat. A few blocks away he hailed a cab and had himself driven out to the spaceport.

He went on foot to the inter-world bank and withdrew all his money. Dividing it exactly in half he put one bundle into his pocket, and the other into an envelope he had gotten at the bank. He addressed the envelope to Effress and dropped it into a mail chute.

At a newsstand, he bought a morning paper and a magazine and brought them into a lunchroom and found a table in one corner. For over an hour he ate slowly and read as he killed time. When he consulted his watch and saw that his flight would begin loading in a half-hour, he rose and walked without

haste to the Personnel Bureau.

"I have an urgent appointment with Mr. Wrestler," he informed the girl in the outer office. "He's expecting me." As she opened her mouth to question him, Albrecht went on past her and into Wrestler's office.

Wrestler was standing at the front of his desk. A large handbag rested on the floor a few feet away.

Ken Albrecht pulled his gun from his armpit and showed it to Wrestler. "Were you going somewhere?"

Wrestler's eyes opened in shocked surprise. "What do you want here?" he asked indignantly.

"Put my passport on your desk, and step back."

"I don't have your passport." Wrestler's voice was a whine.

"It would almost give me pleasure to shoot you," Albrecht said in a conversational tone of voice.

WRESTLER'S shoulders slumped. The starch seemed to go out of his body. He drew a wallet from his breast pocket and pulled out a card—which Albrecht recognized as his passport—and laid it on the desk. "What mistake did I make?" he asked listlessly.

"None. But I nearly made the mistake of waiting too long to see the obvious."

"Tell me, how did you

know? I thought I'd covered perfectly."

Albrecht picked up the passport and put it into his pocket. "It was very simple—after I'd figured it out. First, your age. You must be near to sixty. We both know what happens to you when you reach it. You would probably give your fortune to get away from here. Then your lack of cooperation in helping me find the girl—for no apparent reason. And who would be in the best position to put her on the job, and assign her to someone from whom she could steal a passport?"

"And finally, why wouldn't you let Effress in to see you? When he came here investigating, you decided it would be best to put me out of the way. It all adds up."

Wrestler tried to smile. "Better luck next time."

"Perhaps." Albrecht brought his pistol down hard against the side of Wrestler's head. "Sorry to do that," he apologized to the unconscious man at his feet. "But I've got to be certain that you don't try any more tricks until I'm safely away from here."

He went out of the building and across a grassy court and into the waiting spaceship.

Twenty minutes later he was on his way home.





AUDITION

by Robert Arnett

Whether Earth and its peoples would gain the benefits of membership in the Galactic Federation depended upon the performance of the greatest violinist in the world.



THE GREATEST violinist of Earth sat in the spaceship and cracked his knuckles. This was the only sign of apprehension he displayed as the alien craft, in some incomprehensible way, moved through immeasurable space.

He was stocky, with powerfully sloping shoulders, with strong, square hands. He had bright blue, glittering eyes, and a chin like a chunk of granite. He looked like a weight-lifter, or a middle-weight wrestler, and he had not a hair on his massive head.

His name was Basil Kaevid, and the fate of the world rested upon his shoulders. Yet as he sat in the spaceship that did not resemble a spaceship, almost at ease, he was sustained by a diamond core of egotism, a self-confidence that had never been chipped by fear or shattered by self-doubt. When it came to playing a violin, he was Earth's best, and he knew it. Neither the novelty of space travel nor his own terrific responsibility appeared to disturb him.

He sat a little apart from his six human companions who shared the stateroom, and a feeling of contempt came over him as he looked at them.

But they were not contemptible. They were the high representatives of the

Earth, the six chosen representatives of the World Council of Governments and the three billion humans, whose fate now rested in Sir Basil Kaevid's hands. They sat tensely in the fat, comfortable chairs, taking quick, short puffs from unwanted cigarets, grinding out the tobacco with unnecessary concentration, starting short flights of conversation that tail-spinned abruptly. There was Chin, whose implacable face glowed with a faint film of sweat; Curruthers the lean, indomitable, horsefaced Englishman; Gomez the Portuguese, behind whose placid brown countenance sparkled an incredibly quick brain. There was McDowell, Simonovich, Donet—all exceptional men...all frightened.

KAEVID SMILED without warmth. "To look at you," he said, speaking collectively to the six, in a voice that held an edge, "one would think you doubted my ability."

Donet gave a small start of alarm, and dabbed quickly at his thin features with a damp handkerchief. "Not at all! Not at all! After all, those of us here were instrumental in choosing you to represent Earth! Of course we have no..."

"Cybernetics chose me," interrupted Kaevid coldly.

Chin nodded politely. "True, Sir Basil, very true. But you may be sure that we

have no doubts concerning your ability. We know very well the ability of the cybernetics machines..."

"And you just wonder whether you fed them the right data, don't you?" Kaevid stood up. There was no sense of motion in the spaceship to disturb his equilibrium. "And now you're patting me on the head with pretty little speeches, for fear you'll disturb my confidence, for fear you'll upset me, and I won't play my best!"

He paced the thick carpet and paused to look at them with honest curiosity. "Don't you know that nothing disturbs my ability to play? Didn't cybernetics show you that? Don't you know that nothing you can say or do will disturb my ability appreciatively? I am Basil Kaevid, the greatest violinist in the world. You know it; and since I am not burdened by any false modesty, I know it. There is nothing to worry about."

"Then keep calm," interjected Curruthers. "Don't blame us if we seem a little nervous. After all, here we are on some sort of other-worldly space-craft, going God knows where, at what rate of speed. You can't blame us for being nervous. After all, we're just ordinary mortals, with no pretense of anything more. And the outcome of this...er...Audition..."

A PORTION of one wall disappeared and the Walg walked in.

It moved its dumpy, bulbous little body in an approximation of an Earthly bow. "We have arrived, Earthmen," it said politely. The Walgs were invariably polite. "Welcome to the site of the Audition—an artificial satellite expressly built for this specific event."

The Walg turned to Kaevid. "It shall be as you wish. Your friends may accompany you, or they may wait for you here."

Six of the Earthmen stirred uneasily, glancing uncertainly at the seventh.

Basil Kaevid grunted. "I'm tired of looking at their frightened faces. I'll go alone." He picked up his priceless violin almost carelessly.

The Walg waved a tentacle; a section of the wall swung out; a flight of human-sized steps slid silently into place; and the first Earthman descended onto alien soil—although "soil" was not the right word for the spongy regularity of the satellite's surface.

Kaevid took a tentative sniff. "Air seems all right," he said matter-of-factly.

He rubbed his square, strong fingers over his gleaming bald head in a gesture familiar to millions of Earthlings. "Let's get on with it," he said to the Walg. Wrapped

in self-confidence, Kaevid followed the little alien up the gentle incline of a hill topped by a large, faintly-gleaming edifice.

THE SIX representatives of Earth watched him intently as he approached the building—watched him from the comparative familiarity of the ship. Curruthers' thin lips twisted into the faintest of smiles. "Look at old Baldy go. He doesn't even handle that Guarnieri with any respect."

Donet sighed, and gave a Gallic shrug. "And with him go all our hopes and aspirations."

Gomez added softly, "Good luck to him—and to Earth!"

Inside the edifice, the Walg turned to Kaevid and made another approximation of a courteous bow. "Welcome to Audition Hall. I will be happy to show you your dressing room, where you may rest from the rigors of your voyage."

"I'm not tired," said Kaevid.

"This way, please," said the Walg.

Kaevid followed the Walg down a long, tubular corridor filled with a subdued, quiet light, and suffered himself to be led into a small room furnished with Earth appurtenances. It contained a couch and a table, upon which stood more-or-less familiar utensils containing food and drink.

The Walg gestured toward the items on the table. "Refreshments suitable for Earthmen are here. The elimination room is in there." He pointed a tentacle toward a door. "Now, I will leave you alone for a short time, to meditate." His bulbous little form waddled from the room.

AS THE DOOR closed, Kaevid thought contemptuously, "If that's a sample of Higher Development, the people of Earth certainly have nothing to worry about."

The emptiness and silence of the place disturbed him. Basil Kaevid was used to noisy, admiring throngs; depression settled over him. He laughed shortly to himself. "Perhaps the strain is telling on me!" He lay down upon the couch, briefly pleased by its perfect support, and fell asleep immediately.

HE WAS AWAKENED by the Walg, standing politely a few feet from the couch. "If you please, Sir Basil, the Auditions are about to begin."

Kaevid sat up, yawned, rubbed his fingers over his baldness. "I'm ready. Let's go."

The Walg formed an ingratiating smile. "First, it is necessary for me to repeat the circumstances of the situation that brings you here," it said, in the manner of one explaining a foible.

Kaevid frowned. "Skip it. I know what it's all about!"

The Walg gave what it meant to be a sympathetic shrug. "I know—but the Rulers insist."

Suddenly, somewhat to his own surprise, Kaevid's temper slipped its bonds. He jerked to his feet. "Always the 'Rulers!' Always the damned, invisible 'Rulers!' Why don't I ever see one? Why do I never see any creature but you absurd-looking Walgs? You know what I think—I think these 'Rulers' of yours are a very convenient fabrication! I think that whenever you need a reason for one of your incomprehensible actions, you blame it on the 'Rulers!'"

For a moment, Kaevid struggled with his temper. Then, muttering, "I'm sorry," he sank back on the couch.

A LITTLE HISS of air emitted from the Walg's breathing apparatus in the form of a sigh. "I'm afraid, Sir Basil, that it is very unlikely you will ever see a Ruler. There is no particular reason why you *should* see a Ruler; and, besides, I regret to say that your eyes are not quite properly constructed. However, the Rulers will be in Audition Hall, as that is one of their duties; and, if you look carefully out of the corner of your eyes, as your phrase goes, you may be able to see a bending of light, a

refraction. That is a Ruler. It is probable you will never see one more clearly."

Kaevid grunted skeptically. "And these 'Rulers' are absolute top-dogs in this galactic set-up, eh?"

"If you mean that the Rulers rule—that is true. They do. That is because they are the most highly developed life form in the galaxy, and development entails responsibility."

"I suppose that the rest of you 'life-forms' wouldn't take over the job if you had the chance?"

"We would prefer not to," replied the Walg seriously. "It is an onerous task. Like street-cleaning in one of your planet's cities, it is simply a task that must be done. There is no special honor associated with it."

Kaevid sank back resignedly on the couch, his strong hands clasped behind his head. "I believe you," he said, sarcastically. "And since there's no help for it, you might as well get on with your spiel."

The Walg spoke quietly, politely. "It is necessary that I repeat what you perhaps already know in order that there shall be no complaint to the effect that you did not understand—should you fail."

"Don't worry your head about that," Kaevid muttered grimly.

"WHEN THE life-form, Man, on your planet, Earth, discovered a limited ability to control atomic structure, that information immediately was received by all members of the Galactic Government. This resulted in an inspection of your intellectual development, inasmuch as the ability to use atomic power is Step One in the procedure of becoming a member of GG. Representatives of GG, including primarily members of my own life-form, made the journey to Earth to determine whether your life-form, had developed sufficiently for admission into GG.

"Your development was checked against the time available for development, and found adequate. We investigated your scientific and social achievements and found them also adequate. We studied your ability to associate amiably and constructively with each other, and compared the number of non-conformists with the number of conformists. We checked the number of what you call selfish actions against the number of what you consider to be altruistic actions. We looked carefully at your methods of emotional communication, including the practices of dancing, music, drama, and the written word, and found..."

"Well, for God's sake, if you did all that, why couldn't

you—or one of your hypothetical, invisible 'Rulers—have gone into Carnegie Hall one night when I was playing there, and spared me this ten-million-mile fool's errand?"

The Walg sighed again. "I'm afraid the purposes of the actions of the Rulers are not always immediately apparent." It continued, "... and found that your life-form had advanced sufficiently along the noble road of achievement to be eligible for GG membership. The only serious deterrent was the fact that organized groups, of your life-form persisted in disagreeing violently with organized groups and attempted to solve such disagreement by mutual extermination."

KAEVID GRINNED wryly. "If this Galactic Government of yours is going to give us the powerful instruments you spoke of on Earth—if we're admitted—aren't you afraid we might turn against some of you in a few centuries?"

The Walg answered solemnly, "The matter was given thorough consideration, and it was determined that by the time you would be in a position to do any harm to any member of GG, your advancement would be such that you would no longer have the desire to do so. I am afraid you have very little understanding of the sphere of

achievement you must encompass before you attain a semblance of equality with some of the more highly-developed members of GG.

"To continue, it was determined that your planet was eligible for GG membership, it was, of course, necessary to convince your life-form that such membership was desirable. This we did convincingly with scientific demonstrations."

"I'll say you did," the musician mumbled, remembering the ancient man restored to the days of his youth, the basket-case that astoundingly grew new arms and legs, the instantaneous cure of all the people in the world sick with cancer.

Suddenly his body was slick with sweat, and an icy lump settled in his stomach. He realized fully, for the first time, that if he failed, the wave of hate that would greet his return would be a tangible horror. There were many more diseases besides cancer—many millions of aged. The tense threat of Atomic war was a constant, disturbing vibration in the neighborhoods of Earth. If he failed, Kaevid saw clearly, he could not go back. Even the World Council representatives would be in danger when they returned.

AND WITH the full realization of the Audition's importance there came a flooding resurgence of his

superb ego. Basil Kaevid stood up from the couch and straightened defiantly his powerful shoulders. He was no longer petulant. "Go on with your resume—I don't believe I know your name."

"Call me Walg," said the Walg. "I see you have now realized that one of the reasons for holding the Audition on this artificially constructed mass. It is perhaps not the same as a recital in your Carnegie Hall, when you are not aware of the presence of the Rulers. The circle of achievement is perhaps greater?"

Kaevid nodded grimly. "Go ahead, Walg."

The Walg said, "And when your life-form decided that membership in GG was highly desirable, there remained only the final test, inasmuch as the part represents the whole. Members of your life-form voted on one to represent them in a demonstration of a form of your Art. You were chosen, and consequently will appear before the Rulers—three in number—to demonstrate an Earthling's ability. If this ability is judged adequate, your planet will take its place among members of Galactic Government."

Kaevid said hoarsely, "I'm ready. Let's get on with it." He picked up the violin case.

The Walg led the way from the small room, down the softly-glowing corridor. "There are three candidates

at the present time-interval, including yourself. I will not trouble explaining whence the others come, as their planets are at a considerable distance from your Earth. The site of the audition is near your planet because the other two candidates are less easily exhausted by long journeys."

Kaevid wondered briefly at a culture that considered ten million miles "near."

"In here," murmured the Walg.

A DOOR OPENED, and Kaevid entered a tremendous room, or, rather, hall. It was apparently empty, except for a relatively small platform in the center.

"You will mount the platform," explained the Walg, "and I will remain with you to explain anything you wish to know."

Kaevid could feel the tension tingling along his nerves as he made the long walk to the platform and mounted the 10 steps. But though cybernetics had chosen well, the emptiness grated upon him. He was used to the appreciative rustle of large crowds when he stepped on platforms.

"The first candidate," said Walg, "is that life-form over there." He pointed to what appeared to Kaevid to be a large edition of a praying mantis. It held some kind of a little box, and a stick with

a knob on the end. Another Walg stood beside it.

Kaevid glanced around for the third candidate, and saw only a dead-black *container*, roughly spherical, about six feet in diameter.

Walg said, "Yes, the third candidate, is in there. It is not an oxygen-breather; the first candidate, like you, is."

Walg motioned Kaevid to a chair that had been provided for him. "Sit down, now. The first candidate is about to perform."

The praying mantis moved to the center of the platform with jerky steps. Kaevid felt again the same sense of alienness that struck him when he had first seen a Walg. Slowly the life-form lifted the little box and struck it four times with the knobbed stick. The little box emitted four shimmering sounds, but Kaevid's trained ears could not detect a resemblance to any scale with which he was familiar. Then the praying mantis left the center of the stage.

Puzzled, Kaevid asked, "What's it doing now? Why did it leave the center of the stage?"

Walg answered calmly, "Because it is finished, of course."

THE TENSION Kaevid had been rigidly controlling broke. He guffawed joyously, shattering the silence of the vast hall with a whoop of laughter. What had he been

worried about? He—Sir Basil Kaevid—who would play Mozart, Beethoven and Handel as they had never been played before! He found that he could not stop the welcome relief of laughter, until Walg touched him with a thin tentacle and something very like an electric shock sobered him at once.

"That was very impolite," reproved the Walg severely. "That life-form would never be guilty of laughing at you."

Kaevid wiped his streaming eyes. "I'm sorry. It was just—just those four notes! Four notes!" With difficulty he smothered another surge of laughter.

The Walg said, "I must point out to you that you are the next candidate."

Sir Basil Kaevid nodded briskly. "Of course." He got to his feet, regal assurance in every movement, withdrew the violin from its case, and stepped confidently to the center of the platform. Remembering Walg's advice regarding the Rulers, he tried to look out of the corner of his eye. Was that a flicker of light he saw? He shrugged; it didn't matter. He placed the musical instrument under his chin and held the bow lightly over it. His strong, square fingers had never felt so sure. He took one deep breath—and began to play.

WHEN HE had finished, Kaevid blinked. It took

him a moment to regain his surroundings. As usual, Music had transported him. He was aware that he had never played quite so well before; he had played his best, and his best was Earth's best. For a moment, the absolute silence startled him, until he remembered that this audience did not applaud.

He returned to his chair beside the Walg; there was no doubt in his mind that earth would be accepted into Galactic Membership.

"You played very well," Walg said politely.

Kaevid condescendingly nodded. "Thanks. What do we do now?"

"You may return to your dressing room and await the decision, or you may remain here while the third candidate performs."

"I think I'll stay, if it's all the same to you." Kaevid was enjoying himself, now that the ordeal was over and he was confident of the outcome.

Walg nodded. "If you will excuse me a moment, I must assist in placing the third candidate in the center of the platform."

Kaevid watched as the two Walgs moved the black container. As Walg returned to his side, a low musical sound filled the great hall. It penetrated his inner-most being. It was unbearably sweet, filled with intolerable longing and the strong promise of complete fruition.

THE NOTE changed; it became a dozen notes, each individual, each part of the whole. And then the colors came. Not just colors—but visible reflections of the entity that was Basil Kaevid. The colors blended, swept the huge hall on wings of perfect sound. He found that the color had meaning. There was the color of the icing on the cake with which he had celebrated his sixth birthday. There was the color of his mother's eyes, blending with the exact shade of grass that grew beneath the elm tree in his own back-yard. There was the delicate hue of the body of the girl with whom he had had his first love affair. There was the little jingling sound of the Christmas tree ornament that had hung on the fir tree branch one December 25th. There was the grandeur of the ocean's shoreward surge, as he had heard it on a particular July day. The sounds and colors of all his past came shining forth—and not just his own past—the past of all the people he had ever known—and not only theirs, either—the past of all the people who had ever lived on Earth—and the future of all of them—each a part of a glorious Whole: Earth Entire, a vision, a loveliness... meaningful... p u r p o s e f u l! Kaevid thought his heart would crack.

The silence was a blow. Kaevid was not aware when

the music ended, the colors faded. How long he sat there he did not know, until he felt the touch of Walg on his arm. "Come, we return to the dressing room now," it said quietly. "I think it would have been better if we had gone before the third candidate started to play. However, it is over."

"Yes," Kaevid bumbled. "It is over." He looked down at the violin case at his feet, too spent to obey the impulse to smash it.

Reading his mind, the Walg picked it up.

"Yes," Kaevid repeated numbly, "it is over." How could the tinny little sounds he had made compete with the grandeur of the Art of the Third Candidate?

HE PERMITTED himself to be led back to the dressing room.

"Sit down here on the couch," said the Walg kindly, and assisted him. "I go now to learn the results of the Audition. Here—I will place your violin by the couch."

"Don't bother," muttered Kaevid, but Walg had gone. He sat on the couch, a fog of apathy enveloping him, the fiber of his ego shriveled. He thought of the great green Earth to which he could not return, and wonderly idly how he could commit suicide—painlessly, if possible—no, not painlessly, but with all the pain possible, for the

crime of arrogance, the assumption of superiority. How could he have been so blind, how could...?

"Congratulations," said Walg, smiling in Earth-fashion.

"What?" wondered Kaevid, blankly.

"Congratulations," repeated Walg. "Candidates One and Two were admitted. Your Earth is now a member of Galactic Government. Your mission has succeeded."

Kaevid looked at the Walg with a stricken face on which Hope was vainly striving to be reborn. "I don't understand. Not... *Not* the Third Candidate?"

The Walg gave its rendition of a shrug. "It is really very simple. Perhaps you still do not understand the Test?"

"I guess not," mumbled Kaevid.

“WELL, THE TEST concerned the ability of the candidates to use what they had. Candidate One had a box—a small box and a stick. It is difficult to do much with such an instrument. Yet those four notes he struck—the minimal amount—will reverberate always in your memory, although your earthly sensitivities did not immediately respond. When you are an aged man—and now it will take you a long time to attain that state—the slightest effort of mind will

bring back those four exquisite notes.

"Candidate Two also had a sort of box, equipped with strings and a bow. It is difficult to get much expression from such an instrument, yet the candidate did superbly well. In fact, I was most pleasantly surprised.

"Candidate three used not only the full range of the spectrum visible to you, but also called upon a telepathic device that enabled it to play your memories, aspirations and race-consciousness back to you. How effective these endeavors are with the Rulers, I do not know. With such devices he should have been able to do much more. I know you were profoundly moved, but the Rulers were not impressed with the performance.

"The Rulers were not impressed," repeated Kaevyd blankly. "If the Rulers were not impressed by *that*, what would impress them?"

"It is difficult to tell what would impress the Rulers. The Walgs do not know what art-forms, if any, the Rulers possess.

"But," continued Walg, "I am interested in this little music box of yours. I have never actually tried to play one. Would you mind if I—that is—if you don't mind—"

"By all means," urged Kaevyd bitterly, "by all means

try your hand...er...tentacle at it."

AND FOR the second time the soul of Basil Kaevyd was bathed in beauty—this time, beauty from his own violin. Beauty he could not hope to equal. The walls of his self-control broke.

He held his face in his cupped hands, and the salt tears dribbled through the interstices of the strong, square fingers.

When Walg had finished playing, Kaevyd stood up and wiped his eyes. "Do me a favor," he said humbly, "accept my Guarneri as a gift from me for all your kindness. I won't have any more use for it."

The Walg assayed a smile that was nearly Earth-like. "Thank you. Thank you very much. It is a very nice toy."

Kaevyd nodded wryly. "Yes...yes, of course. A toy. A very Nice Toy. After all, on my own Earth, we sometimes judge the capabilities of our children by observing how they handle the simple toys we give them to play with. Simple toys, like wooden blocks."

Walg nodded agreeably. "Shall we return to the spaceship and tell your friends the glad news? I shall be most happy to accompany you."

Walg was always polite.



PURSUIT

by Ron Smith

Wallach was the lean, rough and tough kind of spaceman. Only he didn't feel either rough or tough now, with this creature after him!

HE SHOT a quick glance over his shoulder, and his eyes widened in terror. The Frejul was

still there, now closer against the horizon, its green shape looming over the red sand of Mars.

The man pushed himself to even greater speed. As he ran, he brushed a hand across his sweating brow, noticing, in that second, that he had lost his glove. He didn't care; he ignored it, his mind rushing as fast as his feet.

His name was Shil Wallach, a spaceman of lean, rough appearance. Only now he didn't feel so lean—as a prospective meal for the Frejul—nor so rough.

Before him loomed the Pink Mountains red now in the glow of the small sun low on the western horizon. They were about ten miles away; he quickly cancelled them out in his mind as a possible means of escape.

He looked behind him again. It was still there.

If only it would trip, fall in a gopher hole perhaps, so he could gain time—time to think out a way of escape. But he shook his head grimly, as he ran, tiring now. "No," he said to himself.

He knew there were no gopher holes on Mars.

THEN HE thought of the Gentle Mounds—about a mile ahead, a little to his left. There, he thought triumphantly, was sanctuary. If he could reach them, those strange, deserted underground dwellings of a race long since

passed into extinction, he be safe.

If I can make it, Wallach thought sourly.

Behind him the Frejul was moving closer; not more than a hundred yards separated them now. He could see the luminous eyes, large yellow eyes the size of floodlights, glaring at him balefully. It was over fifteen feet high, a bilious green in color, with speckles of red, its skin a slick, slimy smoothness.

As he ran, furiously, the image appeared mockingly before his vision, a sight he could not banish from his mind. *What will it do to me?* he wondered, sickening at the thought.

He did not know. No spaceman had ever encountered one before except from a distance, unobserved; and certainly no man had been pursued by a Frejul before. He did not know why he should be singled out for the first. Since the Mars colony was young, and exploration and investigation therefore limited, no one knew much about them. Except that they were intelligent (how intelligent was unknown) and that the females were apparently dominant sexually—their culture, if they had one, was undetermined.

He thought of these things as he ran, but they gave him no answer—no answer as to why he was being pursued, no solution to his predicament.

If I can just reach the Gentle Mounds, he thought.

AND THEN Wallach screamed. He screamed because he had tripped—not in a gopher hole, but in a Clentel-Beast hole.

His hands clawed at the ground convulsively as he tried to regain his feet. He slipped in the sand, his legs flailing, his face contorted in unbelievable horror.

He turned and saw that the Frejul was upon him. He threw his hands to his face, his body trembling uncontrollably.

He fell to the earth and buried his face in the sand, clenching his bare palm between his teeth, his mind quaking in horror at the thought of the monster rending his flesh.

He waited. But nothing happened; nothing moved. There was no sound.

Slowly, Wallach raised his head from the sand, slowly peered out from between his fingers.

The monster was there, standing above him, motionless. He started to scream again, then caught himself.

The Frejul held out one of its tentacles; it made sounds which he couldn't understand.

But Wallach knew what the green hulk was saying. He looked at the outstretched tentacle, in which there was an object—his glove.



The Heirs

by Irving
Cox, Jr.

Once this world had been
humanity's home, but
now it was known as the
Planet of Horror.

STILL UNMEASURED miles short of its destination, the ship lurched from the time drive into objective space. Lieutenant Cannon felt the customary wrench of mild nausea—and a cold shock of fear. Something had gone wrong; it nearly always did in these one-man, commercial carriers.

The Lieutenant grabbed for the control panel, to cut off the power, but he was too late; an explosion rocked the floor of the cabin and sent Cannon reeling against the metal wall. A moment later, he was floating awkwardly in midair as the gyros cut out. The automatic safety mechanism threw the cabin free from the exploding power pile.

Cannon caught the back of the pilot's chair and swung his hand toward the controls. The motion was too abrupt. It sent him spinning toward the view-screen; by twisting his body

Thirty years ago, science fiction authors were more or less sold on a standard portrayal of far-future man: a wizened creature with a big head, non-sexual, his limbs atrophied to the point where he could barely get around under his own power. In recent decades, a variety of portraits have been drawn, and here Mr. Cox presents a picture which is no less plausible, but is certainly more interesting than the big-heads of bygone days.

grotesquely, he was able to avoid smashing the glass. Very gradually, then, he eased himself into the chair, buckling the landing strap across his hips to hold his body in place. Deep in his mind, he was cursing the military service; it was their fault that the commercial ships were slapped together from left-overs and discards. Cannon had spent most of his twenty-four years cursing the generals and their eternal wars—cursing them silently, in the secret places of his soul.

IN THEORY, Cannon had two alternative means of escape. He could radio the base for help, and wait for a pick-up cruiser. Or he could use the short-lived power of emergency rockets to land the escape cabin on any planetary body that he was able to reach. But he was too far from the galactic base to hope for his beam to be picked up; and he had perhaps one chance in a thousand that his ship had emerged into objective space anywhere close to a habitable solar system.

Reluctantly, Cannon snapped down the lever that activated the viewscreen. Green-tinged static waves swam across the glass briefly, slowly resolving into a star-patterned sky. The radiant

sphere of a planet hung in the upper quadrant of the field. With soaring hope, Cannon tabbed the calculator for directional data. When he read the tape, he knew that he had played into phenomenal luck. The explosion of his ship had flung him on a course that would coincide with the orbit of that planet. He had ample power in the emergency rockets to make a landing.

He would have to land in less than an hour. He ran a hasty spectographic analysis; the planet had an oxygen atmosphere. Then he checked the viewscreen again—and he seemed to recognize the astronomical pattern of the neighboring sky. His ship had lurched from the time-drive almost at its point of destination.

Cannon clenched his fists against his lips. "Oh, Lord, not that!" he whispered aloud. He had wanted to see it, yes—but from the safety of space. He had not intended to land in that seething swamp!

He was close enough to the planet to see the gapping scars torn in the surface, the sprawling deserts of red dust. With shaking fingers he rolled the chart film through the projector until the image coincided with the pattern on the viewscreen. Beyond any doubt

this was the solar system where man had originated; the scarred globe dominating his screen was Earth itself.

The horror world.

Air caught at the falling escape cabin. The Lieutenant felt the abrupt tug of gravity as the triangular glider wings shot out. He hesitated before he fired the rockets. It might be wiser to crash—to die at once, without facing the horror. In the military academy he had been taught to accept suicide as a normal device for solving problems; the suicide squads were often the only means the military had of penetrating an enemy raid-dome. Yet, at twenty-four, a man does not readily resort to suicide, except under the hypnotic impetus of organized patriotism. Cannon glared at the horror world mirrored on his viewscreen. He was determined to live; he was determined to survive, despite the horror.

Furiously he jammed his thumb on the firing stud, but his hesitation had been a split-second too long. The escape cabin soared toward Earth too close for an initial approach. There was not enough fuel in the emergency rockets to pull the cabin into an alternate course.

During the last two minutes

of flight, as the cabin fled screaming less than half a mile above the ground, Lieutenant Cannon saw the checkerboard pattern of the horror world swing in a stately panorama across the viewscreen. Sprawling jungle forests and mountain ranges sculpted by rain and wind; a long, straight stretch of broken paving that might once have been a highway; geometric patterns of crumbled granite which suggested the locations of ruined cities.

THE ESCAPE cabin came to a wrenching stop in an open field. Cannon was flung by force of momentum into the control panel. He felt it shatter beneath him. Bruised and cut, he pulled himself to his feet and, in dismay, surveyed the wreckage in the cabin. Not one of his machines had survived the landing, and he had no replacement parts aboard.

Cannon pried open the cabin door and stood looking out at the yellow grass carpeting the landing field. He was waiting—waiting for the horror to rise up around him. What form would it take? He did not know. No man knew—except that monstrosity and degradation were scientifically inevitable.

He heard no sound—only

the gentle whisper of the wind over the yellow grass. Surely they (whatever they were) had noticed his landing; surely they had seen his flight through the tranquil air. Why hadn't they come to investigate?

Every galactic scientist said that even the soil on the horror world would still be radioactive. Cannon went back into the cabin for his portable counter, but he found that it, too, had been smashed in the landing. Again he hesitated at the open door. Without the counter, how would he know where he might go safely?

Perhaps the field itself—his muscles tensed with a quiver of fear. For a moment, the nodding, yellow grass seemed to be a desert of red dust. A trick of the sunlight, of course; of the horror that trailed ghost whisks across his mind. With an effort of will he pushed the fear out of his mind. He had to leave the cabin; he had no other alternative.

HE THRUST a blaster and a recharge cartridge into his belt clip and leaped through the cabin door. The ground felt soft and moist beneath his feet. The air was sweet with the fragrance of growing things. The strange

contrast disturbed him. This was Earth—the horror world—but it seemed an idyll, the dream of peace that every man treasured deep in his soul.

With a feeling of confidence, Cannon strode toward the trees that bordered the field. He was a tall, well-built man—a typical physical product of the military training schools. Although he was on leave, he wore his fleet uniform: black, tight-fitting tunic and trousers, laced with the mesh of the automatic heating grid and pressure stabilizer; black, plastic boots; and a broad, metallic belt crusted with the clips that normally held the paraphernalia of his profession. His face, surmounted by a closely cropped mat of blond hair, had a settled, arrogant expression—product of his military training.

The trees beyond the field sheltered a cool, forest glade where the sunlight filtered through lacework leaves and danced jewel colors on the surface of a swift-moving stream. Again the idyll! In the towered, cluttered, galactic cities Lieutenant Cannon had seen a thousand times the tri-D pictures of a similar glade, sometimes the only ornament on the bare walls of

the tiny dwelling units. A visible symbol of every man's dream—but here a reality of the horror world.

The Lieutenant came to a place where the stream widened to form a pool. He heard the sound of splashing and the muted note of a woman's voice. She was singing softly to herself, a haunting minor-keyed melody.

CAUTIOUSLY, with his blaster in his hand, Cannon pushed aside the brush until he had a clear and unobstructed view of the pool. The woman had just pulled herself from the water. She sat on a low, flat rock, spotlighted in a shaft of sunlight. The water clung in a thousand tiny pearls to her naked shoulders. She moved languidly, luxuriating in the warm sun, the most sensuously beautiful woman Cannon had ever seen.

She looked up at him and smiled. "Why don't you come down here and sit in the sun?"

"You—you're speaking galactic!" he gasped.

"We had the language first," she answered.

Somehow this was all wrong—absurd. Cannon felt a vague fear, but that seemed foolish, too. "I'm a stranger on your world," he told her. "I just landed in—"

"Yes, we saw your ship," she replied matter-of-factly, as if a landing on the horror world were an everyday occurrence.

"You saw it?" Cannon repeated. "And no one came out to—to—" His voice trailed off; he wasn't altogether sure what he had expected the earth people to do.

"The elder sent me to meet you; I thought it would be more pleasant if we first saw each other here in the glade."

SHE MOTIONED again for him to join her, and he moved slowly toward the rock. Her nudity embarrassed him; no galactic woman would have been so crude. But he reminded himself that the earth had become a primitive world; he couldn't expect this brown-skinned girl to understand the standards of a sophisticated society. The miracle was her altogether human appearance—on this world. Scientifically he knew that was impossible; nothing remotely human could have survived. Yet here she was, breathtakingly lovely and as human as man's lushest dream.

She pulled him down on the rock beside her. "My name is Marian."

"I'm Lieutenant Cannon—Milt Cannon of Astoria.

That's another planet, Marian, many billions of miles away. Of course you wouldn't—"

"Astoria? Isn't that one of our most highly developed colonies. Near the heart of the galaxy."

Again her answer seemed absurd; how could anyone on this neglected horror know anything of man's galactic culture? Cautiously he tried to ask her for an explanation. She threw back her head and laughed—musical laughter that sent hot waves of desire flaming in his veins.

"All the worlds of man are our offspring," she reminded him. "Your civilization began here on Earth, centuries ago. We're naturally interested in your progress; we like to keep in touch."

"But how, Marian? Earth sends no ambassadors to the civilized planets."

"We have visitors now and then—people who stray back to Earth, the way you did, Lieutenant Cannon."

VISITORS, yes: archeologists and physical scientists, he thought. He had read their books. The last expedition had returned only a year ago. Unanimously the scientists reported the horror: deserts of red dust and nightmare monsters crawling among the misshapen trees. Why had

they lied? Or had they never found the quiet glade or the tranquil fields?

"You said the elder sent you to meet me," he reminded her. "By that do you mean your father? The leader of your— He paused, unsure of his choice of words. "The leader of your tribe?"

"The elder is just—an elder. We have many, wise in the things of the mind. We always seek their advice. And your word 'tribe,' Lieutenant—I don't think you quite understand. All men are one tribe; all men are brothers."

He stood up, putting his blaster back into his belt clip. The conversation seemed nebulous, words vague with invisible shadows. He wanted to come to grips with something real. He asked, "Am I to meet the others, Marian? The elder, perhaps?"

"In time, Lieutenant Cannon."

"Is your villages close by?"

"Just beyond the old city."

She arose and drew a thin veil around her shoulders. "I hoped we might talk a little longer, but since you're so very impatient—" She sighed and there seemed to be a note of sorrow in her voice.

She led him across the bathing pool on the causeway of small stones. They ascended the mossy bank and emerged

from the trees on a broad, artfully landscaped highway. Perhaps half a mile away Cannon saw the arching levels of a city rising above the rolling, green meadows. The sun was beginning to set and the flaming gold of the sky was reflected from the countless city windows.

A FAIRY city it was, fragile with the stuff of dreams: the kind of city the people of the galaxy dreamed of building one day, when the wars were finished and they could escape the confinement of the thick, metal raid-domes. The earth duplicated in intimate detail the hope and the vision of Cannon's own mind.

"Why did you come here, Lieutenant?" Marian asked as they walked toward the city.

"I was curious; I had a month's leave from the fleet, and I wanted to see Earth."

"We decided you weren't a scientific expedition when we first saw your ship. They always come in large cruisers—scores of men at one time."

"As a matter of fact, I didn't intend to land, but my power pile blew and I had no alternative."

"You were going to sit out there in space and just look at us?"

"I had a viewscreen with

good magnification." Sheepishly he added, "I was afraid to come any closer. Marian, the scientists have lied. They must have been subsidized by the military; that might explain it. No one in the galaxy knows the truth about Earth."

"The truth, Lieutenant?" She laughed gently. "In the best of us, truth is relative to our point of view—to the overall configuration of what we believe. That's one of the failings that makes us human beings."

"In small things, maybe; but this, Marian, is a deliberate conspiracy." So it seemed to Cannon: a gigantic conspiracy against all mankind—to keep the galaxy in ignorance, enslaved by war. On Earth, was peace, but they called it horror, for that suited the purposes of the war-makers. If men knew that perfection such as this could actually exist, they would become impatient with the restraint and the regimentation of war; they would throw off the yoke of the raid-domes and begin building a similar perfection for themselves.

"We say that Earth is a horror world," he told her, in shame.

"And do you find it so Lieutenant?"

"WE BELIEVE that only because the inhabited

worlds are so far away, and so few of us ever have the chance to come back to the earth. Most people feel a sort of guilt, too: the horror was our fault. We tried to move as far away from it as we could, to forget it by ignoring it."

She repeated her question. "Are we a horror, Lieutenant? Look around you; tell me what you see."

"In school we're taught that the earth was involved in the First Galactic War—just after men began making the early galactic colonies. Our present weapons, in a primitive form, were used in that war, and Earth was burned with radioactive beams. Not enough to destroy all living matter—as our guns do now—but enough to cause a riot of uncontrollable mutations in plants and animals—and in human beings. There were new horrors created with every passing generation, and no one could prevent it. We had done that—or so were told—to our mother world. So we ran away, to the farthest part of the galaxy, and built new colonies and made new wars. Now, when we burn a world, we do it cleanly and completely; nothing outside the raid-domes survives."

"So what you did here," she said, "gives you a reason to

call your weapons humane."

"That's it, of course. That's why the militarists have persuaded the scientists to lie."

"Perhaps that is a logical explanation that you can believe, Lieutenant Cannon. For you it will become a truth."

HER ANSWER troubled him; it seemed to have a significance he couldn't grasp. But he had no time, then, to consider it more carefully, for they had entered the city. He had expected to see the streets thronged with people, throbbing with the churning wheels of heavy traffic. But the city was silent and empty.

"We no longer live in our cities," Marian explained. "We found more freedom outside. But we keep the cities in repair—national monuments, you might call them or living museums of the past. I wanted you to see the city first, Lieutenant, so you wouldn't form wrong impressions about us."

Cannon marveled at the wide streets, the plate glass store fronts, the spacious interiors: a city naked beneath the open sky, and unafraid. Nothing in the galaxy was like this, for the impenetrable metal of the raid-domes blotted out the sun and restricted the city buildings to jam-packed rabbit warrens hunched over

tunnel roads. Until it was dark Cannon walked in the deserted earth city, reveling in the crisp, geometric beauty of unconfined space. This, too, like the glade, was a part of man's dream: the world he would make when the wars were finally done.

"And your people have given all this up?" he said to Marian unbelievably.

"We've outgrown it."

"But what could possibly be better or finer—"

"The city is the final product of a material culture. For all its conveniences, it can clutter a human life with a great many tensions and burdens. A simplicity in things gives freedom to the mind, and that's the only freedom that has real value. On the earth, Lieutenant, we've progressed to the next evolutionary stage of man. One day you colonists will find a way to take that same step forward for yourselves."

MARIAN turned toward him and took his hand in hers; her voice pulsed with a deep intensity, a desperate urgency. "Remember one thing, Lieutenant Cannon, whatever else you may think of us, whatever else you may see on the earth: it is the mind that makes men brothers, nothing else. Nothing else! And what

we have made here—this universe of the mind—belongs to you, too. To every man, Lieutenant, if he can awaken the mental potential he already possesses."

At dusk they left the city on a broad, cement road. They walked a short distance toward a dense stand of trees. Among the trees Cannon found her villiage. Village? The connotation of that term made it inapplicable, but he knew no other word to describe the endless scores of small, plain cottages scattered through the forest.

It was dark by that time and Cannon actually saw very little of the place where Marian lived. No curious crowds gathered around him. Occasionally he caught a glimpse of someone in the shadows, but that was all. He saw no cluster of buildings which might represent a center of government. When he asked Marian about it, she laughed.

"Government is vitally necessary in a material culture," she conceded, "but scarcely in ours. The mind creates its own discipline and its own standards."

"But how do you handle the essential services of government—communication, medical welfare, education?"

"The direct meeting of minds simplifies a great deal."

HER REPLY was a subtle shock to him. Again he felt a numbing sense of vague fear. "You mean telepathy?"

"In a sense, but it is both more than that and less. Our mind-meeting is a permissive thing. We cannot force a way into a part of the mind that is closed to us; if we choose, we can wall ourselves off entirely from outside contacts. But the mind-meeting gives us a community democracy more perfect than anything we've ever had, because it isn't first filtered through the treacherous symbology of words."

"And you've been using this sort of communication with me?"

"Of course not, Lieutenant. It might have frightened you."

She seemed to answer too quickly, too readily. If she were a telepath, how would he know if she had used the technique or not? And it seemed clear that she had. What, otherwise, accounted for the fact that she seemed to speak galactic as if she had grown up on a civilized world? Worse still, the mind-meeting implied mind reading as well. She said it was possible to close off a part of the mind, but Cannon certainly didn't know how that was done. He knew why he felt afraid, then: he was helpless in her hands.

Could she also shape his thinking to suit herself?

AT AN INTERSECTION of paths an old man met them. He was tall and ramrod-straight; the sharply chiseled angles of his face gave him a marked resemblance to the commander of the military academy on Astoria—the only militarist Cannon had ever respected. Instead of the fleet uniform, the old man was wearing a loose, toga-like garment that left half his chest exposed. Except for the difference in costume, he might have been the commander's twin.

"This is our elder," Marian said. "His name is Paul."

"We are pleased to welcome you to Earth, Lieutenant. Our guest cottage is ready."

Cannon followed Marian and the elder to a tiny, one-room dwelling hidden among the trees. The ceiling radiated a warm glow of light and fire blazed on the hearth. The cabin was furnished in maple, worked in traditional patterns, centuries old. Cannon had seen tri-D's of the same style in his school textbooks, but never the reality, not even in the museums of the galaxy. He had always yearned to live with the old things, but under the raid-domes of the galactic cities that was out of

the question. The craftsmanship of wood was too time-consuming for a civilization that devoted its energies and its resources to war. In the small, functional dwelling units of the Astorian cities, the furniture was always identical—simple, plain designs which could be stamped from plastic by the power machines.

CANNON dropped into a chair, running his fingers lovingly over the richly grained wood of the arm. "Did you give this sort of welcome," he asked, "to all the scientists who came to visit the earth?"

"We would have, if we could," Paul replied.

"They refused?"

The elder turned toward Marian. "My dear, see if the food is ready. The Lieutenant is hungry, I'm sure."

"Why are you giving me so much attention?" Cannon demanded.

"Your situation is different. The archeologists had their ships; they could always reject us and go back to their own worlds. Your ship crashed, Lieutenant. You cannot escape. It is our duty, then, to teach you our—our form of communication: you can think of it in those terms."

From a wall cabinet Marian brought a tray of food. Where it had been prepared, Cannon

had no idea, but on the tray he saw every item of food that was his own special preference. Marian had done a superb job, he thought, of picking his brain clean and passing the information on to the others. Their telepathy, their peaceful universe of the mind, made the earth natives his superiors; apparently they weren't aware of that. They were making every effort to be friendly, to curry favor. Why? Were they afraid of him?

Then he saw on the tray a sizzling smani steak, simmering in graddan sauce. The rarest delicacy on Astoria, and only available in half a dozen cities close to the mountains. No man had yet found a way to preserve the smani for export. They couldn't be serving that steak here on earth; it was a physical impossibility.

For a split-second a new thought—terrible with shattering implications—began to form in Cannon's mind. But it was gone before he could focus upon it clearly, washed away by a wave of embarrassed confusion. For he looked again at the tray and what had appeared to be a smani steak was actually a food he had never seen before. A native product of the earth, obviously, although its resemblance to the smani had been remarkable.

AFTER THE Lieutenant had eaten, Marian and the elder left him alone in the cottage. "We will be close by, if you want anything during the night," Paul promised. "I am most anxious for you to have a good rest, Lieutenant. Your education in our techniques must begin immediately in the morning."

"Marian told me the mind-meeting is a higher level of human evolution. How can you expect to teach me—"

"We must," Marian said fervently. "There is no other way, Lieutenant, for you to live among us."

"We are entirely certain," Paul added, "that our methods are not beyond the ability of any human mind. It is simply a new approach to the use of the mind, and the mind, Lieutenant, makes men brothers. Nothing else! You must believe that. You must never doubt it, whatever happens." The elder spoke with the same desperate intensity Marian had used earlier when she said the same thing. Why did they hammer so much at that obvious fact?

As soon as Marian and Paul were gone, Lieutenant Cannon felt a tremendous weariness—unaccountably, because he had done nothing to tire himself, and not quite four hours before he had emerged from the

physical suspension of the time drive. The suspension was like a long and dreamless sleep; it always left a man alert, energetic, eager for physical action. There was no reason that he should feel exhausted, yet Cannon could not hold his eyes open.

HE EXTINGUISHED the ceiling light and slid beneath the soft, down quilt on the bed. Languishing in the half-world between sleep and wakefulness, he thought with pleasure of the quiet beauty of the earth. The galaxy called it a horror world, this reality of man's dream: the forest glade, the fairy city gleaming in the golden sun, the straight ribbon of landscaped highway...

The highway! A shock rocked Cannon's mind. From the air he had seen the roads and the city sites; and they had been ruins. He knew that was significant, but he couldn't understand why, for his brain was too drugged with the desire for sleep.

For a long time he struggled to pull himself awake. Very slowly he drove back the fatigue. He had no idea how much time passed. Hours, certainly; perhaps half the night.

After a time he was able to sit up on the edge of the bed. His head swam with a nausea of mild pain. It occurred to

him that if he climbed to the top of one of the skyscrapers in the deserted city he would be able to see a vast area of the surrounding countryside. If there were ruins nearby, he could identify them. It would have been wiser, perhaps, to wait until daylight, but if he did Marian and Paul would not let him go. He knew that. For some reason of their own, they hoped to conceal the truth from him.

He slipped out of the cottage. A faint, gray light washed the eastern sky. It was nearly dawn; that surprised him. He must have slept the night through—or at least fought that long against the mind-weight of fatigue. As his brain began to function more normally, he realized that the desire for sleep had been induced—perhaps by a drug in his food, perhaps by some form of hypnotic suggestion.

Hypnotism? Why not? If the natives of the earth used telepathy, the lesser skills of the mind would be no problem to them. But it was a chilling idea, to consider what a telepath might be able to do with hypnotism.

WHEN CANNON reached the highway, he heard footsteps in the forest behind him. He began to run toward the city, silhouetted against

the morning sky. Clearly he heard Marian's voice, and he knew she was speaking directly into his mind, "Come back, Lieutenant. For your own sake—"

By ignoring her he found that he could cut off her voice; so that was how a mind walled out a telepathic intrusion. It was good to know. Cannon began to run faster. He was on the outskirts of the city. He saw the long vistas of broad streets and sparkling glass.

Then Marian spoke again, "Yes, Lieutenant, it was hypnotism. For your protection. Believe that, please. We only want to help, because you've no way to escape. We can't maintain it now that you know—not without your co-operation." Her words were colored with a sense of frantic appeal. "Come back, Lieutenant; let us do this our way. Don't try to prove what you think you saw yesterday."

"What I think I saw?" he repeated aloud, grimly. "I know it, Marian. I know absolutely—"

And suddenly his voice was choked in a paralysis of terror. Hypnotism and mind-meeting: with that technique Marian could have made him accept anything as objective reality. The dream itself—the glade, the open-faced city, the cottage with its beautifully crafted fur-

nishings, even the smani steak—all that she had reconstructed from the fragile hopes and desires of his own mind.

THEN HE understood. And before his eyes the fairy city dissolved into ruins. The dream became the reality of the horror world, the savage chaos that was Earth.

"We never tried it this way, Lieutenant," she whispered. "There were always too many men in the scientific expeditions for us to create a consistent illusion that would be acceptably real to them all. You're the first isolated individual we've ever reached. The others have seen only the horror, and nothing else that we have tried to say has meant anything to them after that. For a few hours, Lieutenant, you have seen us differently. You must believe, now, what we told you: it is the mind that makes the brotherhood of man, nothing else."

In terror he flung her gentle voice from his mind. He turned away from the gutted city and began to run across the scarred, red earth. Where? Why? He had no idea. Dust clouds choked his lungs and blinded him. The trailing, purple foliage of things that had once been trees lashed at his face. He flung his arms across his

eyes, yet still he saw the horror.

And he could not escape. He was confined to this hell for life. He screamed defiant terror at the swirling dust, and his reason began to crumble.

A THICKET fifty feet high loomed ahead of him. A remote ancestor of the plant might once have been a rose, but the blooms on this monstrosity were black and three feet in diameter. Cannon used his blaster to try to cut a path through the bush, but even before the knife fire died away the surviving branches swung together and choked the path.

Cannon heard steps behind him. That would be Marian. He swung toward her, still holding the blaster in his hand. At that moment the first light of the rising sun touched the earth. Cannon saw her clearly—the thing that had touched him and fed him yesterday. He tried to pull the trigger, but his muscles were paralyzed with horror.

For one minute more his sanity survived. He heard Marian's voice, gentle and compassionate, "Appearances are nothing, Lieutenant. Only the mind makes a man. We have evolved new techniques, true—but we know you can learn them and speak for us to the

scientists when they come again to the earth. We want the galaxy to lift itself up to equality with us, Lieutenant; otherwise in the course of history it is inevitable that we must become your heirs. You are our children—our colonies; we want to save you if we can."

A tenuous thread of reason

whispered that she was right. But madness screamed a psalm of terror. The heirs of man—these things! This nightmare was hell, and as long as he lived he was condemned to it.

As long as he lived. There was a release, then; there was an escape. Cannon jerked up the blaster and jammed the muzzle between his teeth.



The Reckoning



During the last few months, a number of readers have urged me to re-instate "The Reckoning" in this magazine, as well as in *Future Science Fiction* and *Science Fiction Quarterly*. These readers would like to see how others felt about various issues, to see if their own preferences were shared by a majority of other voting readers and fans.

I'm perfectly willing to heed this request, and you'll find a Readers' Preference Coupon on page 130; it's backed up with an ad on page 129, so that it can be cut without mutilating any text.

This coupon is merely for your convenience; it's not necessary to use it if you want to vote; we'll pay as much attention to a postal card, and enjoy a letter even more.

The stories are listed in order of appearance; you list them in order of preference. You don't have to rate each story, though it helps; ties are perfectly acceptable. And if you really disliked any particular story, an "X" beside it will tell us what we need to know.



THE LAST WORD



Dear Mr. Lowndes,

I can't have it both ways, can I? My first reaction was: izzatso? But then I decided I had better clarify my thoughts, and hit on writing a letter as a fairly good way. So here you see not a conclusion supported by facts, but facts leading up to (I hope) a conclusion.

First of all, I like stf as entertainment. On this level, I like Conan stories, with a mighty, invincible hero, and I like the longer adventure stories of deCamp, who scrupulously avoids mighty heroes. In fact, I actually re-read deCamp novels. Then: I like the novels of Merritt, and magazine novels by Jack Vance. I liked Weinbaum's "Dawn Of Flame" and "The Black Flame". In general, I like stories which have atmosphere, which effectively communicate a feeling to me. And I like stories with an amount of satirical humor.

These stories I would recommend to non-fen, explicitly stating that they are no more than what they are. Certainly not "Literature".

Also, I like stf as humorous entertainment. This is a highly individual matter, but

I like Kuttner's Gallagher stories, and others; the Ransom and MacTate stories; Lockhard's young patent lawyer; most of the Anderson & Dickson collaborations. I howled with glee over Nourse's "Family Resemblance" and "Grand Rounds", and I chuckled over the thiotimoline reports.

These, too, I would recommend.

I like stories in which the author has something to say, subtly or not. We're getting closer to "Literature" now, aren't we? Along these lines, I have liked assorted stories by Simak, Ray Jones, Asimov, Heinlein, and others. These are stories in which the author has proposed a problem and has shown his characters struggling with it, sometimes with success, sometimes without. A list of examples would include Simak's entire "City" series; Jones' "Noise Level"; Asimov's "Nightfall"; Heinlein's "Universe", etc.. The stories were written to entertain; and there are others, equally entertaining, with less food-for-thought content, which I liked as well, or better.

These, too, I would recommend.

We have novels where the author has presented an imagined society at greater length, and I would recommend many of those. There are some which I consider the best: "The Demolished Man" and "More Than Human". And not far under them, "Under Pressure" ("The Dragon In The Sea") and "Call Him Dead" ("Three To Conquer"), which I thought the most suspenseful of stf novels.

I have a little list—a very little one—of stories which I would call "Distinguished". stories by such authors as Sturgeon, W. Miller, Dickson, Farmer, Russell. These are the stories I would point to which would serve as examples of the best achievements of stf.

And in every case, I would point out that stf is written on all of the other levels, too. If you would call this "having it both ways," I would point out the range of writing in stf, trying to make some value judgments...

Hold on! Somewhere along the line I have to make some value judgements. How would I (explain away?) the pure action stories, the stuff which inspired articles like "Light as Air, Heavy as Hate", which appeared in *Partisan Review* this spring...?

Whoever got the idea of talking about everything that

bears the label "science fiction" with the same generalizations?"

—DANIS BISENIEKS,
303 Hinsdale H., ED. Q.,
Ann Arbor, Michigan

I entirely agree. Fiction of any sort is written on all levels; but only in the instance of science fiction have I seen an attempt to describe the category itself as "Literature". Those so attempting maintain that science fiction ought to be taken seriously, ought to be highly respected by any literate person, and assert that many examples of it are excellent enough to endure through future ages, even as the literary classics of the past have endured.

My response to this contention has been, "All right, put science fiction to the test. If, as you claim, it is worthy of respect along with Shakespeare, Cervantes, Joyce, etc. (I mention these three in particular because they are especially strong on imagination), then it can stand up under the same type of scrutiny which is applied to serious fiction outside the fantasy and science fiction field, scrutiny from which comes that general agreement whereby we acknowledge a masterpiece."

At this point, the retreat begins, and the claimants protest

that (a) they didn't mean everything anybody calls "science fiction", but what they themselves call science fiction (b) science fiction is a special case in literature, and has to be considered in a different manner (c) only snobs and phonies go around demanding that science fiction conform to standards, and shame on you!

The fact is that while some great literature may be science fiction, this does not indicate or prove that science fiction, as such, is great literature.

KNOX UNDER FIRE

Dear Mr. Lowndes:

I wish to suggest that Calvin M. Knox's "Sunrise On Mercury," the lead story in the May issue of *Original Science Fiction*, is based on an entirely false premise. The author postulates a sort of space madness, of unknown causation, for one of his characters. My medical studies do not indicate space madness for the character; only for the author.

The supposed examples given are of no importance. The welder who rips open his faceplate and drinks vacuum is a mere exhibitionist; there are few men—very few indeed—who possess the mighty development of the swallowing muscles required to drink vacuum. He was only showing off.

It was also said that "a ra-

dioman rigging an antenna on the skin of his ship might suddenly cut his line, fire his directional-pistol, and send himself drifting away sunward." Of course, but this is not space madness. Radiomen are notoriously eccentric, and have long been accustomed to send themselves. One may suddenly cut his line and fire his pistol any time, just for the hell of it. They call it "getting the bugs out." It has nothing to do with space. Accustomed as they are to miniaturization and close quarters, they can do it in hardly any space at all.

The real trouble with Astrogator Curtis was that he was trying to figure out how that "efficient sodium-coolant system" on the ship worked. He knew that it was not efficient enough to protect them from cooking while the ship was on the surface of Mercury. On the other hand, he knew that it would suffice if the ship was in orbit around Mercury (page 13). He knew further, that the ship would remain perfectly comfortable even nine million miles closer to the sun than Mercury (page 3).

"What the hell?" he said to himself, and so did I.

Curtis also knew that a sodium-coolant system works by heat-transfer, and he asked himself what they transferred it to in space. The reactor compartment? No, because that was so super-refrigerated

—although he could hardly have said why—that it would chill the rest of the ship when the door was opened (page 4).

He dared not ask his Commander, whom he suspected of being an extra-terrestrial spy in near-human guise. This was later proved by the Commander's extraordinary perceptual ability, which he unthinkingly disclosed. Standing on the surface of Mercury (page 9) he was able to see two human figures (page 10) at a distance of twenty miles, with no other aid than "a pane of optical glass." Since twenty miles is more than ten times the horizon-distance on Mercury, the men were about two hundred feet vertically below the horizon. This remarkable visual feat is entirely beyond the power of any Earthman. The Commander also betrayed himself in another way. Although masquerading as an adult human, he was unable to maintain the illusion to the end, and remained on Mercury to play in a puddle.

So Astrogator Curtis, knowing the dire peril the ship would be in as soon as they set down on the planet, realized that he had to solve his problem at once; he determined to make his attempt while they were still close enough to the sun to be in no danger from heat. This brave man, like a true scientist, was *going down the chute!*

It is true that he may have

been a little confused, as this act would place him in circumstances where it would be difficult to profit by his increase of knowledge. But nevertheless, it was not space madness. I get a little confused myself, trying to figure out these space refrigeration systems.

I shall be glad to diagnose any kind of madness for any of your authors who may require it, free of charge. Kindly enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope.

—DR. RAYMOND WALLACE, 110 Llewellyn Road,
Montclair, New Jersey

This is a horrifying situation, Dr. Wallace; it seems that the insidious Calvin M. Knox (*if, indeed, such is his real name; if, indeed, he is human*) has not only smeared Astrogator Curtis but hypnotised the editor into overlooking discrepancies in his account of the expedition.

However, we must not leap—or even stagger—to conclusions; justice and fair play, you know! We shall not make any statements until we have

	If you'd like to see The Reckoning restored, then don't forget to write—or use the coupon on page 130	
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heard Mr. Knox's reply to these charges. Readers are urged to watch this space, next issue; it may be more important than you think.

IN FAVOR OF THE "TRADITION"

Dear Ed.

In the July issue, Willis Freeman struck another telling blow in his one-man war against the casual reader. Yes, I was once a casual reader. I once casually ran into one of Mr. Freemans little gems. It drove me nuts for months, trying to figure what two pages of comments on stories I had never read was all about. Well, this time I was ready for him. So this time, rather than it being confusing it was highly informative. I never before realized that OSF took over *Future's* old numbering system. I had some vague ideas about a mag called *Dynamics* and that OSF numbering system was connected with that. So what the heck happened to *Dynamic*? And just where did you get that irregular numbering system or *Future*; and by the way, why did you dig OSF up in the first place. On second thought, why don't you just give a brief history of the entire mess of numbering systems?

—MILTON STEVENS,
Sherman Oaks, California

Such matters as numbering systems, paid ads, etc., do not lie within the editor's area of authority, but in the area where he is under authority. Thus, I cannot explain *why* all the various peregrinations in titles and numbering took place. However, it is no secret how the titles and numberings go.

With the issue dated March 1939, we saw Volume 1, Number 1 of *Science Fiction*; with the issue dated November 1939, we saw Volume 1, Number 1 of *Future Fiction*. (Charles D. Hornig was the editor; Lowndes was a fan living in Connecticut at the time.) In 1940, Issue Number 1 of *Science Fiction Quarterly* appeared; the date was Summer.

In November, 1940, Lowndes became editor of *Future Fiction*, and *Science Fiction Quarterly*; the first issue of *Future Fiction*, under the new command was dated April 1941, while the first issue of *Science Fiction Quarterly* after the change was Issue Number 3, dated Spring 1941.

Science Fiction continued under the editorship of Charles D. Hornig until the issue dated September 1941, which was something of a collaboration: Hornig picked the stories, but Lowndes closed the issue and arranged for the artwork; since

there was more copy than could fit into the issue, and withdrawing runover stories then left some holes in the magazines, Lowndes picked filler material (both fiction and non-fiction) to fill the necessary number of pages, out of material he had on hand. (Hornig was editing the magazine from California, so had no chance to select last minute items.) The magazine, after this issue, was combined with *Future Fiction*.

Future combined with Science Fiction was issued with the number dated October 1941, Volume 2, Number 1. With the issue dated October 1942, Volume 3, Number 1, the title was changed to *Future Fantasy and Science Fiction*; this was an experiment in using science fiction and fantasy stories (including the weird) under the same cover. Results being unsatisfactory, the title of the magazine was changed to *Science Fiction Stories*, with the issue dated April 1943, Volume 3, Number 4. One more issue, Volume 3, Number 5, dated July 1943, appeared before paper shortages resulted in its suspension.

Science Fiction Quarterly was suspended with Issue Number 10, dated Spring 1943.

When science fiction was restored to Columbia Publications' list in 1950, the maga-

zine was titled *Future combined with Science Fiction Stories*; the date was May-June 1950, Volume 1, Number 1. (Part of the reason for the cumbersome title was the publisher's desire to protect his right to both the titles "Future" and "Science Fiction".)

With the issue dated May 1951, *Science Fiction Quarterly* was revived, the issue designated Volume 1, Number 1. (Less confusion here since the former magazine had no volume numbers.) This magazine has undergone changes in number of pages, but not in frequency or title, so far.

With the issue dated January 1952, (Volume 2, Number 5) the words "combined with" were eliminated from the title of *Future combined with Science Fiction Stories*; two issues later, May 1952 (Volume 3, Number 1), the word "Stories" was dropped, and the title has remained: *Future Science Fiction*.

With the issue dated December 1952, *Dynamic Science Fiction* appeared. At this time, the newsstands were already saturated with science fiction titles; super-saturation in 1953 brought about the slump that eliminated many titles, *Dynamic Science Fiction* among them. It completed one volume (six issues), the final one dated January 1954.

During 1954, when the magnitude of the slump in science fiction sales began to show itself, *Future Science Fiction* shifted to digest size; this was with the issue dated June 1954, Volume 4, Number 1. The slump increased in severity, and it was decided to change the title to *Science Fiction Stories* (2 one-shot issues under that title had shown encouraging sales). Thus, Volume 4, Number 5 of *Future Science Fiction* appeared under the title of *Science Fiction Stories*, and the numbering system has continued in order since then.

With the issue dated September 1955 (Volume 6, Number 2) the words "The Original" were added as a sub-heading to the logo. The title of the magazine, however, is *Science Fiction Stories*, as it has been since the issue of January 1955. (While the words "science fiction" or "science fiction stories" appear in the titles of many science fiction maga-

zines, Columbia Publications, Inc., was the first to issue a magazine entitled *Science Fiction* or *Science Fiction Stories*.)

Complications arose for collectors, however, when *Future Science Fiction*, which was supposedly extinct, reappeared, the new issue designated Number 28. There had been 27 issues of the revived *Future* before its numbering system was transferred to *Science Fiction Stories*. I am often asked whether *Future Science Fiction*, October 1954, Volume 5, Number 3, should be followed by Volume 5, Number 4 (*Science Fiction Stories*, January 1955) or by *Future Science Fiction* Number 28. To this I reply that you may have it either way, or, in this instance, both ways! Really, I don't see why science fictionists, who can absorb alternate time tracks etc., with the utmost aplomb, should be confused.

[turn page]

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LEG PULLING

Dear Sir:

How much like Randall Jarrell is Randall Garrett! If one crosses the I's, if one uses a soft 'G' instead of a hard one, they are the same name. "Parodies Tossed" equates with "Paradise Lost", a poor pun, but one capable of Randall Jarrell's exploitation.

How like Tennessee Williams is William Tenn!

Both of these fine writers ought to use their better-known names for their science fiction output. There is no need for a different name for every enterprise, as in Stapledon's "Odd John". Science fiction is an accepted part of literature; if this were not so, it wouldn't receive the critical attention that it does. Since Campbell's historic article in the *Saturday Review*, it is clear to almost everyone that—like it or not!—science fiction is here to stay.

What surprises me is that the limits of science fiction are so peculiarly drawn! Much of Poe, I think, is part of it; certainly his stories, "Manuscript Found In A Bottle", and the "Facts In The Case of M. Valdemar". Why is not Virginia Woolf's "Orlando" just as much science fiction as George Orwell's "1984"? I would include, also, Vercors' "You Shall Know Them".

The trouble, I honestly

think, is that people tend to look down on material first published in magazines. It needs to be in a book issued by a well-known publisher before it is taken seriously. People forget that "Sketches by Boz" originally came in newspapers, before Dickens made a collection of them which was published in book form. They forget that the first part of Pamela Frankans' "A Wreath For The Enemy" first appeared in *Harpers* magazines as "The Duchess And The Smugs".

I can offer only one suggestion to remedy this attitude: adopt a book format. Where circulation of a magazine is large enough, it should be able to convert to paper-covered book format easily. Most magazines sell for 35¢ and so do these books. I think then that people would be more inclined to take science fiction seriously, more people would buy it—more would save the issues they bought, and more would re-read old issues. Subscription mailing should be easier to handle; the book itself would be more durable—and the only fault I see with the idea is that serials would be anathema, because of one-time sales. Storekeepers are almost sure to stack such magazines with the products of regular paper-back manufacturers.

Returning to Jarrell for a moment, I understand and ap-

preciated—n a y, relished!—the combination of de Camp's "Lest Darkness Fall" and the Major-general's song from "Pirates of Penzance". What I don't get is where he ever got such a weird idea. Some head he must have. He's probably smirking still at the thought of the numbers of people through whom this stiletto of wit passed unnoticed. Altogether delicious!

NORMAN DAVIS, 240 North Regent Street, Port Chester, NY.

There are grounds for doubting that Randall Garrett also writes under the name of Randall Jarrel, or that William Tenn ever assumes the name of Tennessee Williams.

STAGNANCY?

Dear Mr. Lowndes:

Bravo! for your editorial in

the July SFS. Never have I seen the problem of criticism in science fiction stated so clearly. May I venture to suggest still a third mutually-exclusive position, however? This is the one of the ambitious critic who is tired of seeing science fiction, or any other literature for that matter, judged by the tired, limited standards of the so-called "main stream". The "main stream", some of us believe, may be deep, but it is not going anywhere. Let us hope that science fiction does not become just another stagnant pool.

STEPHEN F. SCHULTHE-SIS, 238 Trumbull Ave SE, Warren, Ohio

Aren't you involved in a contradiction here? A stream, by definition, is running water; once it becomes still water, [turn page]

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then it's a pond, lake, pool, puddle, or whatever else would fit. It follows then that the "main stream" of literature is going somewhere; whether you approve of where it's going, or can figure out where it's going, is quite another matter.

FOR MR. HUNTER

Dear Mr. Lowndes:

I rather enjoyed Hunter's letter and his explanations in the July issue. I can't quite agree, though, that the tremendous popularity in science fiction is a myth, even in one way. The top quality stuff is appreciated by enough persons so that a small group of magazines publish slick-type material and pay top rates. True, but there are more persons today than you'd really think who would even like to make something more out of it, but they just haven't got enough money to do that.

I like Frederick Brown lots better in his short shorts. I think I'd even go so far as to say that he's the Science Fiction Master of the short short. I can't quite favor Fritz Leiber, though, in that category; glad to hear that he is an editor. Ross Rocklynne never was on my list of favorite writers. Today, I'll just take Gunn (he was really good in *Startling Stories*), Blish ("Get Out Of My Sky", for

example) and Robert Moore Williams (whose, "Doomsday Eve", is his best yet; he is really improving with every word. The New People, and the way he makes certain events collide, makes this one of the most compelling tales I've ever read.) A particle of Wellman's genius leaked in, and I'll never actually forget this story until the day I die.)

I am sorry to say (and there will be probably a lot of fans who'll thoroughly disagree) that "Out Of The Silent Planet," fell far short of my expectations. It is on my "worst" list, near the bottom. For some reason or other, I've never really liked this type of story.

Well, anyway, Mr. Hunter, Science Fiction might be spread too thin for its audience; there's just not a large enough one, yet.

JAMES W. AYERS, 609
First Street, Attalla, Ala.

LISTS WANTED

Dear Editor:

I am writing to all the science fiction magazines, to ask readers to write to me, giving the following information: Your favorite science fiction magazine, your favorite science fiction author, your favorite science fiction movie, your favorite science fiction fan magazine, your favorite science fiction short story,

and the science fiction magazine you dislike most.

If there is enough response, I will let you know about the results, so you can tell your readers.

**GEORGE HORACE
WELLS**, *River Avenue, Box
486, Riverhead, New York*

ANTI-TIME-TRAVEL

Dear Bob:

My turn to apologize: sorry for the delay of this letter, but I have a good reason for its late coming. SFS just arrived at the big newsstand this afternoon. At least it got here. The March SFS didn't make the stands, result: one Saginaw Michigan fan with a hole in his file of

an up and coming magazine. I think your distributing could be improved, Bob, and I believe that other areas are having similar difficulties. Any comments from the readers?

The index (vol. 7) is a good idea. Strangely enough *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* is the only other magazine to use it.

Covers are always important to me and of course to the selling of the mag and SFS has definitely put forth an effort to secure "eye catchers". One thing bothers me on the May cover is the apparatus taking the place of the hands on the space suits. It seems to me that the pincers—too wide apart, anyway

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—would be insufficient to perform in a wide range of activities.

Mr. Chandler scores first place in the May issue with "Zoological Specimen."

More Simak!! This chap's versatility astounds me. How old is Clifford? I predict greater fame for him (as if he doesn't have it now!)

Much too busy to shove off the debate to a glorious start; however I will say this: Traveling faster than the speed of light, and this is entirely possible, will not push any Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers, or Isaac Asimov into the past or future. Reason: all heavenly bodies pass through space and are

at a given point in a given time only once; consequently, after a body of matter has passed through a given area in a given time, the given area is left even more empty than it was previously. The piece of matter having a gravitational field, presumably, would attract what molecules there were present to itself. Result is *There is no matter there for time travelers to observe or exploit!* Pass the oxygen. I'll take this up next time 'round.

—ROGER WEIR, 1016
Mackinaw,
Saginaw, Michigan

I'm not sure just what your point is, Roger, but perhaps some of the other readers will get it.

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Did you like the cover? _____

Do you prefer this type of cover to the type we had for the September issue? _____

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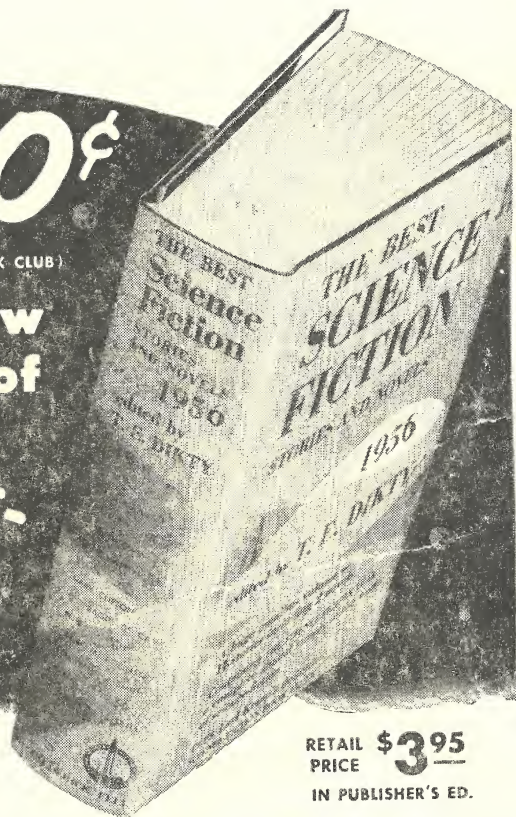
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